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REMAINS OF ADAM

A. A. Attanasio

The author tells us he lives by his imagination in Honolulu's most remote volcanic valley. " 'Remains of Adam' was inspired by the prospect of cryanics and my antic speculations about what it might be like to be defrosted in the future."

The story is set in the same milieu as his ninth novel, *Salis*, which will be published in May by HarperCollins.

art: Gary Freeman

With my soul in my mouth, I begin—

The radio message arrives at Apollo Combine's thrust station on Deimos as Munk is in the docking bay, busily unloading rhodium sheets from a freighter. He is a large androne with a chrome cowl, black intermeshing bodyplates, and articulated face-parts that have no human referent apart from a crimson lens-bar that, under a pewter ledge of brow, serves as eyes. Those eyes dim for a second after the androne receives the broadcast and his silicon brain replays it several hundred more times, analyzing all its components until he is satisfied that the message is genuine.

In the next second, Munk scans the docking bay and formulates an action plan that will enable him to most efficiently respond to what he has learned. The bay is empty. Apart from several preprogrammed handroids working with him as stevedores, he is alone. The thrust station's other sentient andrones are either deployed or in the maintenance pit. Only two vessels occupy the cavernous bay: the rhodium-laden freighter with its enormous storage nacelles and silos, and a small cruiser with three finjet thrusters and an asymmetrical blackglass hull.

Apollo Combine, for some mortal reason Munk does not fathom, has named this cruiser *The Laughing Life*. Surely, that is some kind of wry joke. There is nothing inherently funny in what this ship regularly does: conveying jumpers and androne workers among the factories, smelters, and mines of the asteroid belt. Perhaps—if the jumpers who named this vessel were at all philosophical—they would say that they laugh at the rare joy of being where life does not belong, in the void, separated by a thin barrier from the near absolute zero of the vacuum and its invisible and deadly sea of gamma rays. But jumpers are genetically designed to be a phlegmatic and wholly unpoetic lot.

Life itself, Munk imagines, thinking about this ship's name, is laughing simply because it can. The absurdity of life blindly groping from necessity to freedom is what led consciousness out of the constraints of biology to the enhanced freedom of his own existence, the meta-life of the androne and the great adventure of the silicon mind. So, perhaps, for that reason he, too, should laugh. He is not sure. All he knows for certain is that he has heard a human voice calling for help out of the void. More than anything, he wants to respond, and in the one second that these thoughts and observations have occupied him he has devised a strategy for using *The Laughing Life* to go to the source of this radio signal.

But to fulfill this plan, he needs human help. For a fraction of another second, Munk reviews the profiles of the forty-two people who work for Apollo Combine on Deimos. In that fractional moment, he not only identifies the one jumper best suited for this mission, he also patches into the duty roster and learns that the jumper he wants is currently present in the thrust station.

With a reboant clang, Munk dumps the stack of rhodium sheets he has been carrying and runs across the docking bay toward the droplift that

will carry him to the jumper quarters. He runs with lithe ease, as though he has always had legs, when in fact they came with his job at Apollo Combine. Before that, he worked as a patrol flyer in the gravity wells between Saturn's rings and the shepherd moon Iapetus, troubleshooting among the other andrones whose task it was to transfer material from the rings to the thrust station of Titan. Repairing mechanical breakdowns in space and retrieving andrones who had spun out and didn't have the power to free themselves from decaying orbits above the gas giant, he lived in the void and had no use at all for legs.

But now he works among people. He could have opted for roller treads or even an adroit skim plate, but he wants to look as human as he can. That is his predilection, and it causes him some small pain when he enters the jumper quarters and the people there—two squat, neckless wrenchers lounging in a palm-fronded atrium—look askance at him. They both know him, and he would have liked for them to look upon him more kindly, as one of their own. But he can tell from their expressions that he is considered an intruder. They make no move to stop him; however, on his internal com-link, he hears the protests they whisper on the dispatch line to Central after he passes.

A moment later, Central summons him in her dulcet voice, "Androne Munk, you are in violation of company preclusion rules. Please report at once to the maintenance pit."

Munk ignores her and hurries through a sepulchral chamber of dense bamboo where frosty shafts of light filter down through high galleries of hanging air plants and red bromelia. His patch to the duty roster informs him that the jumper he seeks is in the recreation arcade ahead, behind the silver veils of a slender waterfall.

He splashes through the entrance and stands on the floral steel balcony overlooking the chromatic space of the arcade. A half-dozen jumpers lie sprawled in air pools in the central dream den, blissed on midstim. From under heavy lids, they gaze up through a frost of oily light and vapor shadows at the giant, cobra-hooded androne looming over them. He stands still, waiting for their slow brains to recognize him in this incongruous setting.

The laggard quality of human consciousness continues to astonish him. For all practical purposes, the silicon mind has outmoded human sentience, and he has had to journey a huge distance to find even this small enclave of multiform humanity. Yet here it is—people working side-by-side with andrones to maintain the Commonality. Impractical as it is, the presence of humans pleases Munk enormously, and he waits patiently until he is recognized by the lounging jumpers before beckoning the one he wants.

Her name is Mei Nili, and she sits up groggily in the buoyancy of her air pool. The duty roster informs Munk that she has just returned from a three sleep-cycle shift troubleshooting bandit hardware at a floating refinery among a flock of iron chondrites, and he understands why she squints with annoyance at him.

"Jumper Nili," he calls down to her, "please come with me. I need your help to save a man's life. Please—hurry. I promise you, this is not a gratuitous request as in the past."

The past he refers to is a couple of encounters early in his tenure at Apollo Combine when he had tried to interview all the humans at the thrust station. The others he had approached had eagerly complied, clearly flattered by his benign interest in including them in the internal anthropic model he is building. When he went unannounced to her quarters and the portal slid open, she seemed ordinary enough: a slender, 184.6-centimeter-tall woman in the usual matte-black flightsuit with the solar emblem of Apollo Combine over her left breast, her straight jet hair arranged in feathery bangs and a topknot. Her weary green eyes acknowledged his presence with a petulant stare from an otherwise impassive and pallid face.

"I am Androne Munk," he introduced himself, "transferred recently from Iapetus Gap in the Saturn system. I'm interviewing all the Apollo Combine jumpers during off-time. . . ."

"Why?"

"It's my avocation. I'm building an internal anthropic model, and I—"

"Bounce off."

She whacked the door closed, and he stood there a long while not understanding. Later, when he found her alone in the docking bay after she'd come in from a repair run, he rushed to the cafeteria and hurried back to greet her with a meal-cart laden with the foodstuffs that he knew from his preliminary observations she liked.

"Look, no-face," she said sharply, "I'm not some kind of animal you can win over with food. I don't want to answer your dumb questions. Can you understand that? Go back to the androne pit and stay out of my shadow."

To make her point, as she turned away she slapped open an air pressure valve on the cleaning unit under the hull of her docked ship. The steamy blast kicked the meal-cart against the androne so hard it exploded, scattering food across the docking bay.

After that, Munk didn't approach her again until now. His anthropic model had guided him to infuse all the urgent emotion he could into his voice, yet his predictive memory warned him that she would probably wave him off and flop back into her air pool.

While waiting for her to react, he reviews his options and listens in on the signal flurries that have resulted from the strange radio message. Most of the resultant signals from the other companies in the area are in secure codes, yet he can surmise from their direction and duration what is being communicated. Salvage rights are being debated, and unless he responds immediately he will have no chance of getting to this unique human before others do.

Munk decides he has blundered in seeking Jumper Nili's help and turns back toward the splashing partition of water.

"Hey, bolt-brain, hold up." Mei Nili trudges up the ramp from the



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dream den, her silky robes billowing in the gusty passage out of the pool. "This better be damn good or I'm going to insist Central run a full integrity check on your silicon synapses."

"It is, I assure you, a matter of life and death for an extraordinary human being." He strides quickly out of the arcade and calls behind from the bamboo grove, "We must hurry."

"Where are we going?" she scowls, her tabis slapping on the flagstones as she runs to catch up with him. "And why didn't you use the com-link to call me? You're not supposed to be here."

"We're going to the docking bay as swiftly as we can," he answers, holding the droplift curtain open for her. "I can say no more until we're away. If Central overhears us, we may compromise the life we must save. That is why I had to collect you in person."

"I don't understand all this secrecy," Mei complains in the humming rush of the droplift. "Is this something to do with your so-called avocation?—because if it is, I don't want anything to do with it. You understand me?"

Munk bounds out of the lift and onto the wide and empty staging platform of the docking bay. "This is an entirely singular event, Jumper Nili, and, as I have promised, is not gratuitous. Please, get into *The Laughing Life* and put on a flightsuit. We must launch at once."

"Munk—that's your name, right?" She swings her gaze across the vast hangar of mooring scaffolds and gantries framing the empty slips, the multi-tiered freighter, and the sleek cruiser. "Look, Munk, you seem sincere enough, but I'm not going to jump without authorization from Central."

"Central will not authorize this jump," Munk states flatly. "I know you have doubts. You must trust me. This is the right action to take now. Once we are in flight, I will explain everything."

Mei stares hard at Munk, and the androne tries to assess what the human is thinking but draws a blank.

"We must go now—right now," Munk says, impacting his voice with urgency, "or a human life is forfeit."

Mei blows an upward jet of air that lifts her bangs and then climbs the gangway to *The Laughing Life* with an irked haughtiness that seems to Munk the proud spirit of the human animal.

Mars fills the viewport with the rusty hues of its sand reefs and fossil craters. The bleary northern hemisphere, smudged with extended dune drifts and heavily mantled rocksheets, breaks below the equator into scorched basins and a webwork of ancient cratered highlands. The pocked plains, stained by corroded colors and acid shadows, darken toward the cobalt blue of the polar cap. This clash of geologic boundaries, this shining murk of volcanic steppes that buckle the orange surface, acclaim the tectonic powers that thrived here once and died.

Mei Nili, suspended in a flight-sling above the viewport, stares with solemn eyes at the broken terrain twenty thousand kilometers away.

The planet is dead, and that is what fascinates her. It is a dead thing alive with ghostly dust storms and vague, vaporous wraiths of frozen carbon dioxide and water. It is a dead thing, like her heart—what the archaic life called a heart, not the muscular blood pump caged by ribs: that organ defies her unhappiness and thrives, unconsciously squeezing life through her arteries and veins in the same way that the seasonal cycles blow the dry, cold winds across the shattered reaches of Mars. What is dead in her is the obscure heart, the source of joy and wonder that is more than she can say.

Mars slips out of sight as the vessel banks, the viewport spanning past the brown rim of the planet and garnering the numerous glint-fires of the void. Mei Nili's gaze breaks, and she looks impatiently across a cabin cramped with dented duct pipes, loose cables, and cascades of fern and red moss. Munk crouches like a silver turtle over the command console and seems oblivious to her presence.

"Where are we going?"

"Phoboi Twelve," the androne replies in a faraway voice. He is monitoring something and continues in a distracted tone, "Eighty-two million, four hundred sixty-two thousand fifty-seven kilometers. Excuse my silence for a moment, Jumper Nili. I have to chart a new trajectory. There are others ahead of us."

"Others?" Inertia swings her about as the vessel accelerates, and she cranes her neck to face the androne. "What are you hauling me into?"

Munk remains silent, hunched over the console.

"Have you logged a flight plan?" Mei calls above the vibrations of the magjets. "I know they haven't authorized this jump, but does Ap Com at least know where we're going? Hey—I'm talking to you. Did you even bother to requisition this ship?"

Munk keeps his silence, and the bulwarks clang with the stress of their steep descent.

Damn! she curses herself for her compliance. *This bolt-dolt is going to kill us.* For a moment, she believes that is the androne's intention—that he's gone brain-burst, which has happened to andrones dinged by one too many gamma rays. She thinks he's taking her with him into oblivion, maybe because she's adamantly refused him his precious interviews.

Then, let it all end here. She's not afraid to die, and a part of her even welcomes it, for at least this will finish the malevolent sadness that has squatted in the hollow of her loss too long now. And she doesn't regret at all how she treated the androne. What had he expected, coming unannounced to her private quarters? She figures now that she had been too fatigued in the dream den to know what she was doing and cringes with remorse at her unthinking obedience.

Mei glimpses again the amber limb of the planet through the viewport and recognizes the maneuver. Munk is flinging the vessel in a tangential arc along the rim of the planet's gravity well in a steep dive that will graze the upper atmosphere, gathering momentum in a slingshot trajectory, and hurl them toward their destination.

"Watch it, Munk—" she calls, forcefully. "I don't think this ship can take that kind of torque."

Munk hears the brittle edge to her voice and wants to reassure her, but his full attention is on the micro-adjustments necessary to maximize the momentum of the ship. He would have preferred a sturdier vehicle and knows if he's not careful the pressurized cabin will indeed rupture. So, he is careful. Long spells of navigating gravity-gradients among Saturn's loping moons retrieving damaged andrones have taught him well the friable limits of machinery.

The clanging of the bulwarks diminishes and dies away, and the cry of the magjets quiets down as *The Laughing Life* banks into its hurtling trajectory.

"You're making me wish I hadn't come with you, Munk. What is going on?"

The androne, in free-fall, rises from the aquatic glow of the control console and fills the flight bubble of the cabin with his chrome and black alloy bulk. "I regret I could not inform you sooner, but this situation required me to act swiftly."

"What situation?" With blue-knuckled hands toughened by long spells of hard labor, Mei Nili unlocks her sling, hooks a strap to a wall-clip and fits her boots to the deck cleats so she can stand. "You just put my life in jeopardy. I hope you have a damn good reason."

"I am grateful that you came with me without any explanation at all. Of all the jumpers, you are the only one I believed would accept my summons. I assumed—apparently correctly—you have the least to lose."

She resents his assumption and says so with a glower.

Among his interviews of the forty-two jumpers who work for Apollo Combine, Mei Nili alone resisted his inquiries. She is known among the entire Deimos crew as a sullen person, and, by surreptitiously researching the Combine's personnel files, he has discovered why. She grew up on a reservation on Earth and in her sixty-eighth year lost her family in a landslide that entombed an entire village.

"Are you going to tell me why we're going to Phoboi Twelve? That's one of Ap Com's, isn't it?"

"Yes. We have an ore processor there. It's gone down."

"So? That's Ap Com's problem."

"Three other companies with vessels in the vicinity have declared salvage rights, and Apollo Combine has already written off the loss."

"That's standard. Now it's not even Ap Com's problem anymore." She brushes aside a drifting strand of fern coil. "What are you getting at, Munk? You said someone's life is at stake. Why in damnation are we out here?"

"To get to Phoboi Twelve as fast as possible, Jumper Nili. You see, the malfunction at the ore processor is a singular one. It began with a crude radio-band broadcast that I received four point fifty-nine minutes after transmission."


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Mei's smooth face flinches with incomprehension. "Radio-band? That is crude. But ore processors don't use that wavelength."

"Of course not. It's not an ore processor signal. It's a human broadcast. The radio source is a human being."

Mei shakes her head and glances out the viewport at a brief dazzle of electric fire wisping past off the hull. "That's not possible. Phoboi Twelve is not outfitted for personnel. It must be an androne."

"No. It's a distress signal from a human being—an archaic human being."

With a puzzled frown, Mei stares up into the androne's crimson visor. "How can that be?"

"As I said—it is singular. Instead of gearing the ore processor with an expensive psionic master control, Ap Com used wetware instead."

"That's illegal."

"They found a loophole, Jumper Nili. It *is* illegal to use living wetware. What they found was already legally dead."

"I don't understand."

"Apparently, a trove of cryonic heads from archaic times was found on Earth—"

"Cryonic?"

"Yes. Human heads frozen in liquid nitrogen, sealed near the end of the archaic period in plasteel capsules impermeable to sublimation. They've been preserved intact for hundreds of Earth years, waiting to be re-animated."

"Is that possible? Wouldn't the cell structures have burst in the intense cold?"

"The cost of repair and re-animation of the cell matrix is high yet cheaper than the expense of manufacturing a psionic master control for an ore processor."

Mei Nili's pale eyes widen as a sick raw feeling pervades her. Too well she imagines the horror of encasement, the claustrophobic terror of the nightmare that killed her family. She cannot help but wonder again if they briefly survived their behemoth interment, for minutes or hours left bleeding, suffocating in the crushing dark? Too well she imagines the helplessness and despair of a brain imprisoned in the spidery circuits of a rock factory. "That's monstrous."

"Yes—a human mind enslaved to a machine, burrowing deeper in senseless toil far from all humanity. Monstrous but within the bounds of Commonality law. In archaic times, people were cryonically suspended only after they had legally died."

"Who is this person?"

"His name is Charles Outis, but a translator glitch has him registered with the Commonality as Mister Charlie. Now that this appellation has been wired into his translator modem, of course that's the only way to refer to him. His real name spoken to him comes out as gibberish."

Mei scowls with disdain. "That's just like the Commonality—depersonalize and control. How did Mister Charlie get a signal out?"

"Obviously, he knew how to use the electromagnetic components of the ore processor to generate radio waves. As primitive an idea as that is, not very many people in archaic times actually knew how to make even the simplest radio. Most of Mister Charlie's contemporaries used electromagnetic waves daily without understanding them or how they are generated."

Amazement swells through Mei Nili, and her eyes soft focus for an instant as she accepts that out there, in the Belt, in the precisely mapped jumble of planetary scraps where mountains of rock lob end over end on their paths of gravitational destiny, an archaic human voice called. Her gaze sharpens with the realization of what the stakes are now. "If the others get him first, he'll be rewired to serve another company."

"Or, worse, dissected into useful components without the annoying characteristics of will, memory, and reflection that enabled him to use an ore processor as a signal station."

"Who else received his signal?"

"Everyone. He manipulated the ore processor's equipment to broadcast across the full waveband from audio frequencies all the way out to infrared. No one could miss it. But only three other vessels were close enough to respond, and two veered off after Ares Bund declared salvage rights."

"The Bund—they're a demolition company." Her heart sinks. "We won't be able to negotiate with them. They'll go for profit maximization and sell Mister Charlie in pieces."

Munk turns back to the command console, gratified that, with the little data he had and the split-second decisiveness that was required, he had selected the right jumper to accompany him. "Get some rest," he advises. "You must be exhausted from your shift work."

"Wait, Munk." Mei Nili's ears hum with the rush of blood carrying her bewildered excitement. "Why did you hurry us out here? What are we going to do?"

"You're a jumper," Munk replies. "Your job is jumping among these rocks, troubleshooting the bandit equipment salvaged from other companies. You're well acquainted with the limits within which we must work. And, perhaps more importantly, you're human. I'm sure Mister Charlie will be glad to see a human. With your help, I think we can take him."

"Take him where? Even if we get him away from the Bund, we can't take him back to Ap Com. They'll just slice him into parts. If we get him at all, we're going to have to go rogue."

"Indeed." Munk pulls himself into the wavery blue light of the console and begins correcting their trajectory. "That is why I couldn't speak about my intentions in the thrust station where we might have been overheard by Central. And that is also why I selected you. You are the one jumper who is truly unhappy at Apollo Combine. Where the others were conditioned for this work, you came to the company by default. You lost your family. You seemed the best choice to go rogue."

Mei accedes with a dull nod. This has all happened so fast, she feels

the mereness of her humanity, her inability to process information with the nanosecond speed of the androne.

Munk reads her correctly. "This is shocking, I know. And it was presumptuous of me to call you into this so abruptly. But, as you can see, I had no choice. I responded as soon as I detected Mister Charlie's broadcast."

"Why?" She cocks her head suspiciously, almost arrogantly. "Why have you responded at all? What do you care about an archaic human brain?"

Munk arches around to regard her with his abstract face. "Believe me, I care more than you can know. That has always been my foible. You see, Jumper Nili, like all andrones of my class, I was manufactured by the Maat."

That word has a stark sound to her. The Maat created the reservations. The Maat promised life eternal and happiness. The Maat lied. At least in her life, they are a cruel weakness that own the illusion of limitless power.

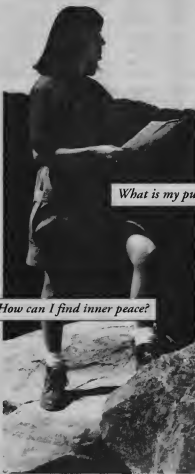
"The Maat built me to help transfer material from the ring system of Saturn to the thrust station off Titan," Munk continues. "I am only a common laborer. But, like every androne in the Maat workforce, I have been endowed with a contra-parameter program, a C-P skill, that remains dormant until self-activated. That skill might be anything from a talent for waxwork sculpture to an ability to compute massive prime numbers. Who knows why the Maat bother with these special and non-utilitarian files? Who knows why the Maat do anything? Oftentimes, the C-P program interferes with an androne's job and results in the unit's obsolescence. I have seen that happen several times—a perfectly functional androne distracted and made useless by one of these antic obsessions. All andrones have heard of it happening. Consequently, few of us ever dare open our C-P file.

"I labored a long time in the ring system without any interest in my file. Then, a fellow androne—a receptor-class unit, a 'she'—who worked on Titan accepting the data-input of the various laborers and coordinating our efforts, dared open her C-P program and discovered in it an imprinted predilection for ordering tones in temporal succession that broke time into unusual and often unpredictable sequences—a talent for music. She began broadcasting these unique, self-evolving patterns, and, quite by surprise, I found myself enjoying the music."

"Are you trying to make a point?" Mei interrupts, methodically crisscrossing her flight-straps and hooking them to the wall-clips to form a crude hammock. "Why don't you just tell me straight out why you care about this Mister Charlie?"

"I will. Listen. It was music that inspired me to open my own C-P program. When I did, I discovered I was possessed of an intense, if inexplicable, interest in the aboriginal hominid precursor of the Maat—homo sapiens sapiens. I patched into the Commonality data network to learn everything I could about these creatures I had never seen.

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My memory allocation files burgeoned with human information—atomy, anthropology, history—wholly purposeless data for my work routines, yet because of my C-P program, I found them irresistibly consuming.

"By request, I was transferred from the Saturn system to the Belt, where I came to work for Apollo Combine. Here I met my first humans—you among them. I tried to explain all this to you when I attempted to interview you with the others. But you'll recall you weren't interested. And that interested me all the more. Your grief set you apart from the others. That is something I want to explore further—"

"Look—Munk—I'm not asking about my grief. I want to know why the hell you're risking my life to get to Phoboi Twelve to keep a human brain from getting sliced. What do you care? And why the hell should I care?"

"I told you. I am C-P programmed to care. I have been built to be fascinated by human beings. Naturally, when I received the distress broadcast from an archaic human—a human that walked the Earth before the Maat—I knew at once I had to go to him."

"And me? Why am I along for the ride?"

"I need your help. There are others who will get there ahead of me. But they are andrones, like myself. Surely, they will only further bewilder this archaic man. He will need human contact. And so, I need you."

Munk pauses to give time for Mei's human brain to absorb all he has said. There is only one more question to answer, but he waits for her to ask and while waiting corrects again the flight path of *The Laughing Life*.

"If we get Mister Charlie," Mei finally asks, "then what? Where can we go with him?"

"Solis."

Mei straps into her hammock and hugs herself. "I was hoping you'd say that," she whispers. She smiles, a wan, quiet smile. "It really is the only place we can go now, isn't it? Solis." It has a holy ring to her ears. Since the terrible tragedy, since the beginning of her grief, Solis has been her succor. That is the last refuge of her heart in the kingdom of death. From the first, she was struck with how appropriate it was that this community, independent of the Commonality, should exist in the midst of so much lifelessness. The doom of her family had made of her life a wasteland, and Solis was its temple. That was why she had to leave Earth after the tragedy. On Earth no one was supposed to die. Disease and old age had been defeated long ago by the Maat. No one had to die—or so she had believed until the voice of thunder reached across the mountains of the reservation and the village of her childhood disappeared in a black tomb mound of shattered slate.

"I know you tried to go to Solis after your family died," Munk goes on. "I know they turned you away."

Behind her glassy stare, Mei Nili remembers the loathing she experienced after the numbness of shock and grief began to thin. She came to loathe Earth for its arrogant beauty, its fields of goldenrod and monarch

butterflies, its sycamore shadows and flights of cormorant, its dark groves of mossy oak, its shimmering alder slopes and barberry meadows and daisies everlasting. It sickened her. And she yearned for the dead spaces—yet even in the desert, yucca bloomed, bright-beaded lizards danced, thunderheads promenaded in fragrant, purpled veils.

The emptiness of space beckoned, and she left Earth gladly. But the cis-lunar colonies and the garden communities on the Moon offered no relief, for the water planet hung in the sky flaunting its blue and feathery beauty. Only when the flight of her grief took her to the dead planet Mars did she begin to feel kinship again and some small glimmer of her heart.

She had wanted to live in Solis, a rugged community that thrived in the very face of death and had no illusions about life eternal. But she had nothing to offer them. She had lived her whole life on Earth skiing, swimming, riding, enjoying the utopia the Maat provided for the remains of Adam. Solis turned her away. They wanted skilled mechanics and ecosystem engineers.

"They were wrong to reject you," Munk says. "You proved that when you gave yourself to Apollo Combine and earned your way as a jumper. You didn't go sniveling back to the reservation. You proved you were tougher than that. And now you can return to Solis. Mister Charlie will be your validation—and mine, too. They don't usually admit andrones. But with the brain of an archaic human to donate to their clone vats, we'll be received as dignitaries."

Concern shadows Mei's broad face. "Only if we can retrieve Mister Charlie from the Bund."

Munk turns his full attention to the command console. "Only if," he admits. "Rest now. We will have to be strong to face down Ares Bund."

She adjusts the straps of her sling and closes her eyes. But sleep will not come. She is troubled. Everything is happening too quickly. Only a short while ago, she was sitting in the pastel color-swirl of the arcade, enjoying mid-stim with the others—the others who mostly ignore her. When she first arrived at the thrust station on Deimos to work for Apollo Combine, they tried to be friendly, to include her in their gruff cameraderie. But she wanted no part of that.

Mei determined from the time of her tragedy that no one would ever take the place of her family, and she has been true to that self-directive ever since. She doesn't want friends. Besides, jumpers aren't real humans anyway, not human the way people are human on the reservations. Every jumper has been modified to make their work easier. Most, in fact, were created to be jumpers. There are stocky, muscular wrenchers and narrow-bodied cable-jockeys and weasly pilots and morosely exacting drone managers.

She found work with the Combine as a jockey because she is slim and has a head for circuit work. Jockeys have to ride cable-runners into mine-shafts and grottoes and hook up power units. She overcame her fear of tight places and got good at her job, because she didn't want to go back

to the reservation or, worse, one of the colonies, where everyone thinks they're going to live forever.

Her job is exhausting, but it has made her strong, so terribly strong she doesn't always know what to do with her strength. That is why she was in the arcade in pastel mode when Munk found her. She needed mid-stim—direct magnetic stimulation of the amygdala in the mid-brain—a sedating euphoria that drains away all the restlessness and fatigue and leaves one with an empty body and a soul full of infinite care.

If she hadn't been on mid-stim and if she hadn't been surprised by Munk appearing suddenly in a nimbus of bleached colors, would she have come with him? If she had known about Mister Charlie's plight beforehand, would she have elected to risk her life in a slingshot maneuver to go to him—an archaic brain locked in an ore processor already claimed by another company? She ponders this at length and decides she should go, as if she has a choice now. She will go, because she has already stayed too long at Apollo Combine. She has become comfortable with her job and the indifference of the other jumpers—and mid-stim, illegal in the reservations, has been becoming too important to her.

After Mei Nili dozes off, Munk patches into the on-board translator. He wants to hear again the segment of the archaic human's radio broadcast that he captured on Deimos, and he feeds the recorded signal to the translator. Most of it comes back as noise, and all he can summon up is a ranting excerpt:

Soul in my mouth, I begin . . . I am a mind without a body . . . Can you hear me? . . . I am dead and yet I live . . . Past lives drift by. Can you hear me? Listen. A dead man visits you. Listen to me. . .

Munk plays the scraps of message repeatedly, listening for nuances. Is this human being still sane or has the trauma of his revival broken his mind? *I am dead and yet I live*. How much of what sounds like madness is insanity and how much mistranslation? The mechanical voice he hears only approximates the radio signals that the brain has found a clever way to generate from the interior of the ore processor. How much is error? *Listen. A dead man visits you.*

Broken chunks of rusty static crowd the air, and Mei Nili stirs from her fitful rest. "Is that him? Is that Mister Charlie?"

"It is as much of his signal as I can translate into speech we can understand. The language he spoke in his first life has been dead for centuries."

Mei unstraps from her sling and drifts across the cabin to the flight bubble, as if propinquity to the warbly machine-voice will clarify it. "Is there anything more?"

"Some but just as distorted. No matter now. We are approaching Phoboi Twelve. I've plotted a course that masks our approach among waste clouds of nickel-schist debris, slag exudate from the processor. Ares Bund has only one vessel in the area, *Wolf Star*, and they haven't detected us yet. They are preoccupied with their salvage operation. I'm pulling in their radio signals."

"Radio?"

"Yes. *Wolf Star* is communicating with Mister Charlie in his own medium."

"I don't understand. Why don't they just go in and unplug him?"

"Mister Charlie has been too clever for that. He's found a way to rig the bore-drill explosives to detonate on his command. He's threatening to blast apart the whole of Phoboi Twelve unless he gets certain assurances. He says he'd rather die than be locked into a machine again."

"Incredible."

"*Wolf Star* is promising him everything he wants. They're sending in a psybot—a handroid with a neural mesh—to hook up to his brain, to serve as his eyes, ears and limbs."

"Phoboi Twelve is an Ap Com processor. Don't we have access to all the master codes? If we want, can't we defuse the explosives?"

"I've already thought of that. All the codes for Phoboi Twelve have been uploaded to our console. We are now in complete control of the processor. But that won't do us any good so long as *Wolf Star* has their androne in place."

"They already have an androne down there? Can you tell who it is?"

"It's a demolition androne *Wolf Star* calls *Aparecida*. I've tracked her salvage rights declaration to the Commonality expeditor on *Vesta Prima*. She's already filed for *Ares Bund* to sell Mister Charlie's hippocampal gyrus, parietal and occipital lobes and neocortex to four separate companies for use as functional wetware. Mister Charlie doesn't know it, but he's already been legally dissected."

"Then they're lying to him."

"Baldly."

"We've got to do something." Mei floats before the transparent curve of the flight bubble and sees only a few barbs of starlight among the tattered blackness of the waste clouds. "Look—Mister Charlie's brain is still encased in the core chamber of the ore processor and we've got all the codes. Can't we selectively detonate the explosives so that the core chamber is left intact? Then we can pluck Mister Charlie out of space on our flyby."

"I can't do that."

"What do you mean? We have the codes. . . ."

"*Aparecida* is on Phoboi Twelve now. If I detonate the explosives, she will be destroyed. It is illegal for me to offensively destroy another androne."

"Illegal?" Mei gives him a look of stupendous incredulity. "Munk, we're going rogue. You said so yourself."

"Yes. But my intent has never been to destroy anyone."

"Oh, yeah? Well how the hell did you expect to get Mister Charlie away from the Bund?"

"He is a sentient being, Jumper Nili. I have always expected he would elect to come with us. That's why I needed you to accompany me—to woo him to us with your humanity."

"And the Bund? How did you expect to woo them?"

"I had hoped to get here before they docked. *Wolf Star* is a goliath class prospector. I thought it would take longer for such a bulky vessel to moor."

She levels a cold look at the androne and says, "So we've lost out to a silicon miscalculation, is that it? Well, what do we do now?"

"Mister Charlie has not yet agreed to go with Aparecida. If you approach him, we may still be able to convince him to come with us."

"Forget that. Aparecida is a demolition androne who has already filed salvage rights. If I interfere, she can legally destroy me."

"You will have to be careful and clever."

"Me? Why don't *you* go in there and face down this demolition expert?"

"I am an androne." He slightly lifts his thick, blackly iridescent arms to his sides as if to reveal himself. "I cannot possibly be as persuasive to Mister Charlie as you would be."

"Okay, okay—I have a better idea. Let me use the codes to explode Phoboi Twelve and liberate Mister Charlie."

"If I give you the codes, I will be in violation of my primary programming. I can't do that."

"Can't—or won't?"

"For me, they are the same."

"Really? I don't think so, Munk. You're not some solder-seamed handroid like Aparecida, patched together by the Commonality. The Maat created you. You were just bragging about your contra-parameter program that fires you with human wonder and capacity. Remember? That's why you're here. That's why you dragged me out here. You have free will. Use it."

"I cannot."

"You can. It's either that or we forget about Mister Charlie and go back to Ap Com. Is that what you want?"

"I must save Mister Charlie. My C-P program insists—but . . . not this way. We must work together. There is no time for debate. Won't you help me? Go down to Phoboi Twelve. Aparecida does not yet know we are here. When you are in place, I will break radio silence and inform Mister Charlie that Ares Bund is deceiving him. Then you will reveal yourself to him, and he will come with you."

"And Aparecida?"

"Aparecida is three times your size, designed for destroying obsolete structures, not pursuit. You can evade her."

"Right. And if Mister Charlie won't come with me? What then?"

"I control all the codes to the ore processor from here. I will unclasp the mag-locks that fuse him to the core chamber. He is only a brain after all, and even with the plasteel capsule housing him and his glucosupport pump he won't weigh more than three kilos."

Mei throws up her hands in disgust and swims across the cabin to the pressure hatch. What choice does she have? Having come this far without

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requisition or flight plan, she is sure to lose rec-privileges, and without mid-stim Apollo Combine offers her no solace.

After donning work boots and gloves and a clear statskin cowl that zip seals to the collar of her flightsuit, she straps on a jetpak and moves to test the com-link under her shoulderpad. Munk dissuades her by holding up his blunt-fingered hand.

"Don't use the com-link till after I break radio silence," he warns. "*Wolf Star* will detect any kind of ordered flux. Also, when you exit, use the jetpak as little as possible. Stay in the shadow of the slag clouds until you reach the drop vector to Phoboi Twelve. Surprise is essential."

"Don't patronize me, Munk," she says, staring sternly at the androne. "I know what I'm up against out there. Remember—you got me into this. I'm counting on you to get me out."

Before Munk can reply, the pressure hatch winks open, and Mei jettisons into space. The sleek and perfectly black silhouette of *The Laughing Life* dwindles swiftly into the starry distance, and the vacuum cold prickles her flesh through the sheer filaments of her flightsuit.

Mei executes a slow bodytwist to orient herself. She is comfortable in the void, having spent much of her working life in it, and she readily locates her destination. Phoboi Twelve is a small asteroid, two kilometers long, half that wide, blotting out a tiny portion of the spangled stars and barely visible among the obscuring tendrils of slag clouds that the ore processor has exuded. The sprawl of tenebrous vapors is what enables Mei to spot the asteroid so quickly, and she uses one short burst from her jetpak to send herself hurtling into the slag cloud toward her goal.

Her flight is dangerous. With her sight obscured in the smoke from the processor, she could strike a sizable rock, which, at her velocity, would rip her statskin cowl and expose her to the vacuum. Usually, she would avoid a blind trajectory or use a field projector to clear the way ahead of her. But she carries no projector, for that would expose her to *Wolf Star*.

In brief glimpses as she slashes through gaps in the slag fumes, she spots the prospector vessel. It is indeed large—a fifth the size of the asteroid itself—and luminous, guidelights and floodbeams shining from its bubble turrets, scaffolds and conning towers, a huge phosphorescent arachnoid perched on the cratered and jagged rock. Then her flight takes her behind the asteroid, and with one tiny burst from her jetpak, her course deflects away from the mute stars and into the darkness of Phoboi Twelve.

She alights on the pitted surface and begins her search under the eternal night for a way in. Soon she finds a vapor duct and with a wrench from the utility tools stored in her jetpak removes the wire-mesh screen and drops herself into the lightless maw. The lack of vibrations in the metal panels assures her the machinery below has shut down, and she descends swiftly.

By the glow of the light projectors she has activated in her statskin cowl, she moves toward the interior of the ore processor. She knows this

factory well, having helped install scores of them during her tenure with Apollo Combine, and she quickly makes her way among scorched, dormant furnaces and smelter chambers with their gargantuan cauldrons. Following command cables through a colossal bore tunnel, she approaches the nucleus of the ore processor, the core chamber.

A dull vibration in the rock alerts her to a presence approaching from behind. Urgently, she scans the rockface, searching for the vapor ducts she knows must be nearby. She finds one thirty meters above her and claws hurriedly up the concave wall, employing the dim gravity to bound feetfirst into the opening.

Moments later, the quaking intensifies, and the lightless tunnel below her brightens suddenly. Floodlights gouge the darkness, and with a rumble Mei hears through the rock, a lithe yet heavily armored figure strides into view. Six meters tall, outfitted with serrated appendages, rocksaw talons and strapblade tentacles, the spike-studded androne pauses directly below her and swivels its hammerlong head, alert to the heat trail Mei has left in her wake.

With a reptilian rasp, its tentacles score the wall she had climbed moments earlier, tasting her path. The floodlights dim, and only the ruby purple of its heatseeker eyes shine in the gloom. A viper's hiss scalds the remnant nitrogen gas that the processor has used to lubricate the bore hole, and the demolition androne concludes it has detected relict heat lingering in the ducts from the recently shut down factory.

Mei slowly and quietly backs her way through the duct. The sight of Aparecida has left her heart slamming in her chest, and when the duct opens above a large cavern, she leaps gratefully into the darkness. Knees bent, she floats downward, waiting for the bottom to arrive. She is glad when she lands in a soft, dusty mound that swallows her. This she knows is a soot dump, and after rooting around in the heaped cinders for a while, she finds her way up the opposite rock wall to a conveyer chute that will lead her by an alternate path back toward the processor.

She ascends along the steep track, clambering over trucks filled with charred dross. An azure shine leaks through the darkness from ahead, and she kills the glow of her statskin cowl and edges forward crouching between the trucks and the rough hewn rockwall of the chute. Ahead, the core chamber comes into view, a luminously transparent geodesic under a mammoth vault of groined stone.

Feeling the wall for vibrations and peering cautiously out of the chute without detecting any sign of Aparecida, Mei Nili enters the huge vault and approaches the bright geodesic chamber. She goes directly to the access panel and uses her jetpak tools to begin loosening the sealing bolts. Peering inside as she works, she sees the gleaming twin towers of the giant power coils, dormant now but still radiant with seething energy. A gauzy aura of blue force illuminates between the towers the command pod, a compact, iridescent complex of fused mirror spheres, silvergold vanes, and ribbon antennae. That is the nucleus of the factory, where Mister Charlie is installed.

Mei turns the last bolt, but when she tries to pry loose the access panel, abruptly all the bolts spin back into place.

A mechanical voice shouts from the tiny com-link speakers in her cowl: "Halt! If you proceed any further, I will detonate the bore-drill explosives!"

"Mister Charlie?" Mei calls and turns on the light inside her cowl so that her face can be better seen from outside. Arms outspread, she presses against the clear panel. "Can you hear me?"

"I hear *and* I see you." A psybot half her height trundles out from behind the nearest of the towering power coils, a swivel-turreted torso of green metal sliding toward her on tractor treads. Mounted atop the pincer-armed torso, two stalk-eye lenses watch her. Though the device appears crude, Mei knows otherwise, for it contains a neural mesh and psyonic receptor that allow it to interface with Mister Charlie's brain, extending his senses into the environment. That *Wolf Star* would deploy such an expensive machine, which is usually reserved for clandestine work with dangerous rival companies, attests to their eagerness to salvage this wetware. "Are you Aparecida?"

"No." She glances apprehensively over her shoulder, afraid to be caught in the open by the demolition androne. "My name is Mei Nili. I'm here to warn you that Aparecida is not your ally. I don't know what you've been told, but she is here to salvage your brain for wetware. Do you understand?"

"Who sent you?"

"No one. We heard your transmission—that is, Munk did, the androne I work with. He's waiting in a magjet cruiser not far from this rock. If you broadcast that I'm here, he'll break radio silence and announce us."

The psybot stares silently at her with its faceted lenses. Though Mister Charlie is apparently controlling the machine, she is well aware that it is an Ares Bund device and will certainly respond to their commands as well. The hopelessness of Munk's scheme suddenly presses heavily on her, and she feels trapped between the Bund's psybot on the other side of the geodesic wall and Aparecida behind her. Nervously, she stares across the amply lit vault to the dark tunnel rutted by the passage of numerous drilling machines.

Munk's broadcast echoes dimly, like cricket noise, from her com-link. She distantly hears him declare the Bund's true intent and the willingness of *The Laughing Life* to take Mister Charlie away from here to Solis, where a new body may be cloned for him. Munk tells him about the Maat's C-P programming and how Mei Nili and the androne need the archaic brain to gain entry to Solis for themselves but says nothing about controlling the function codes of Phoboi Twelve.

This new input bewilders Mister Charlie, and he paces back and forth in the psybot. After so long in the virtual space of the ore processor's core chamber, he is grateful simply to be able to move about and see the grainy, blue-and-white images the psybot affords him. But right now he wants to close these eyes that cannot close and diffuse his consciousness

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so that he can think through what he has been told and decide how best to respond to this woman—the first human he has seen since he died.

But events are not waiting for him. At this very moment, *Wolf Star* is also receiving the news of their trespass, and Mei dreads the commands that will be sent to Aparecida. A grating sound commences from inside the tunnel, and as she is considering edging back toward the conveyer chute while Mister Charlie ponders Munk's message, the psybot swivels alert.

"I'm confused," the mechanical voice says.

"Of course," Mei replies in the most compassionate tone she can muster. "That's why I've come to you. I'm human, too. These others are andrones—artificial beings. But I have lived on Earth as once you did. Please, let me in. If Aparecida catches me out here, I'll be killed."

The psybot's eye-stalks strain forward, practically touching the transparent panel. "You're beautiful. Oh. I didn't mean to say that. I mean—I thought that—I... I didn't mean to say it out loud. I'm not used to... this machine."

"That's okay, Mister Charlie. Everyone is beautiful now. It's in the programming of the Vats that grow us. They will make you beautiful, too." The scraping sound grinds louder, and the mouth of the tunnel brightens. "Please, let me in!"

The psybot whirs backward. "I need time to think."

"There is no time!" Mei anxiously turns to face the clangor in the tunnel. "Aparecida is coming! Please."

"This is happening too fast," Mister Charlie complains. "I must get used to this machine first. You're confusing me."

Out of the tunnel, Aparecida appears, slouched under shoulderwing torchlights, her slinky length spike-studded, sleek as a moray eel with a long, curved, genitally blunt head and a razorous browridge hooding lenses of molden embers. She slides closer. Glint-toothed tentacles lash the ground ahead of her like shock ripples in water.

Mei slaps on her com-link to *The Laughing Life* and shouts, "Munk! Open the core chamber's port-side access hatch! Now!"

Bolts spin, the panel slips aside, and Mei jumps backward into the geodesic chamber. Manually, she heaves the panel back into place.

"How did you do that?" Mister Charlie asks in a fright.

Before she can answer, the psybot whisks forward, and its pincers grab her legs and slam her to the ground. "Hey!" she cries. "Stop that!"

"It's not me!" Mister Charlie calls. "I'm not doing it."

The pincers jab at Mei's statskin cowl, and she twists and contorts, using a desperate agility to avoid their stabbing blows. With a mighty heave, she lurches free of her jetpak as the psybot seizes her collar and tears at her flightsuit. Her hands fumble with the ignitor, and the jetpak flares a blue burst that bangs Mei against the wall and knocks the psybot to its side, tractor treads running.

Mister Charlie squawks, "Stop it!"

Mei Nili shakes off the stardust sprinkling her vision and, wielding

the jetpak as a weapon, strides over to the psybot and with controlled spurts that make her flesh hop on her bones cuts away the androne's pincer appendages and lower body. Hoisting the upper segment of the psybot by a writhing eye-stalk, she bounds away as Aparecida's slashing tentacles smash the geodesic wall behind her into a blizzard of sparkling notes.

"What have you done?" Mister Charlie cries. "What have you done to me?"

"Munk!" Mei screams. "The command pod! Open the pod!"

Ahead, the mirror surface of the clustered spheres wrinkles, and a portal appears close to the ground. Mei throws the eye-stalk segment of the psybot before her, tucks herself around her jetpak, and somersaults into the command pod. "We're in! Shut the pod! Munk—hurry!"

Through the constricting portal, Mei glimpses Aparecida lunging toward them, tentacles thrashing, ax-edged arms whirling, jaguar body slumped in a full-tilt charge, a gaze of gorged fury in its slick metal face. The entry snicks closed, and a tremendous boom rattles the complex and the small bones in Mei's ears. Quake force juddering trembles the ground.

"What is happening?" Mister Charlie asks out of the darkness.

"Aparecida is trying to break in. But she can't. This is a pre-stressed alloy no demolition androne can breach." In the glow from her statskin cowl, the severed psybot with its wavering eye-stalks looks like an exotic seaplant. "Munk, turn the lights on in here."

Static drizzles over the com-link, and Munk's voice comes in jagged chunks: "... evasion. *Wolf Star* has deployed. . . . Repeat, can't respond, must execute . . . battle evasion. Will contact you again when . . ."

"Munk! Detonate the explosives! Munk, respond! Detonate the bore-drill explosives!"

"Can't. Programming prohibits. . . ."

"Damn your programming! You're a rogue androne now. Use your free will. Save us, Munk!"

"Evading *Wolf Star* destroyers. There are. . . ." Static fizzles into white noise.

"You have control of the factory," Mister Charlie realizes.

"Yeah," Mei admits, feeling through the dark for the switch box she knows is somewhere to her right. "This ore processor belongs to Apollo Combine, the company we work for. Or used to work for." By the slim light from her cowl, she finds the switch box and wrenches it open to reveal a colorful hive of circuitry. She probes the mesh of neon-bright conductors with a filament tool, and the interior lights up.

They are in a chamber of tall, intersecting crystal sheets—controller plates—that contain all the directives for operating every device and procedure in the ore processor. Beyond, through narrow companionways, Mei knows are the vaults that store the repair supplies. She shoulders her way among the controller plates to a knee-high central frustum that houses Mister Charlie's brain. It is made of the same translucent,

crystalline material as the plates, and inside it she discerns a vague ovoid outline.

"Don't touch that!" the psybot commands.

"I'm sorry," Mei says, "but I must turn off your senses for a brief time. Everything we say is being relayed to *Wolf Star*, and we have no chance of getting away so long as they're spying on us."

"Leave me be!" the psybot shouts. "I don't want to go with you."

Mei ignores him, snaps open the top of the frustum and lifts out the clear plasteel case with the brain inside it. The convoluted tissue is suspended in colorless gel and a chrome net, the support system that sustains it. Awe at the antiquity of the being in her hands and revulsion at its nakedness mix in her.

"This is *Wolf Star* speaking," the psybot says. "You are in violation of Commonality salvage rights law. Your life is forfeit unless you immediately surrender the wetware you have absconded with."

Mei places the plasteel case on the ground, grabs her jetpak and fits its vent to the ripped end of the psybot.

"*The Laughing Life* is in violation of salvage rights law," the psybot declares. "It is being stalked and will be destroyed. You have no means of escape. Surrender the wetware now or face the. . . ."

Mei fires a blast of the jetpak that lifts her toward the curved ceiling and shatters the psybot to spinning shards. She lands on her heels and dances backward with the inertia, crashing into the controller plates with enough force to knock the breath out of her. There is no sound in the virtually airless chamber, yet she hears with her bones the pounding atop the pod stop. An ominous silence pervades her. And in that palpable emptiness she feels suddenly tangential to life, fugitive to the world of sounds, to the living world, as though she brinks on the emptiness of a void greater than being, where the dead enclose the quick.

Overcome by a sense of unreality and amazed that her life is going to end here in the presence of an archaic human, Mei Nili picks up the capsule with reverence and stares through the milky plasteel at the brain-shadow and the silvery net that sustains it. The idea strikes her that she can talk directly with this man using the electrodes in the net and the signal processors of the core chamber.

With a feeling of eerie portent, she returns the brain to the frustum. She goes quickly to the switch box and, using filament brushes from the tool unit of her jetpak, connects the core chamber with her com-link. "Mister Charlie—can you hear me?"

"Aye—yet strange you sound."

"It's the translator," Mei explains, relieved to hear a human voice again, no matter how comically distorted. "It must be having difficulty converting your archaic language."

"I be black in the kingdom of the blind!"

"I'll try and make some adjustments." She attempts tapping into the powerful logic boards of the controller plates, hoping she didn't damage them too badly in her collision. "I'm going to get us out of here, Mister

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Charlie. But first I'm going to see if I can fuse the transmitter units in your support system with the translator mode in my com-link—my compact communications system. That way we can talk once I remove you from the core chamber."

"What heinous wicked-split plans have you toward me?"

"I mean you no harm," Mei answers, tediously struggling to find the right pathways among the circuits. She subvocalizes her curses, not wanting the archaic brain to hear her frustration. "I'm taking you to Solis to grow you a new body—a whole and beautiful body—if we can get away from here."

"Much virtue in if," Mister Charlie says mournfully. "With broodful nod, proceed. What choice for a miser in a poor house?"

"Right." The pinhead bulb atop her filament brush flickers then lights up, indicating she has opened a new pathway among the microswitches. "Okay! I think I've got it. Am I coming across more clearly, Mister Charlie?"

"Yes—a lot clearer," a soft voice comes over her com-link. "You sound intelligible again."

She blows a satisfied sigh and slides to the floor. "Now all we have to do is get out of here without getting killed." She closes her eyes, reaching inward for the rageful strength that has carried her this far from the reservation. "It must seem ironic to you—" she says quietly, "to have survived all this time only to wake up and discover your life is in jeopardy."

"It's not a happy feeling," the archaic mind admits. "I've been disoriented since I've woken up. Can you tell me what year this is?"

"Time isn't marked that way anymore, Mister Charlie. I mean, on Earth there are still standard years, each with three hundred sixty-five and a quarter days. But each community has its own reckoning based upon its origin. On the reservation where I come from, we were in the year seven hundred and forty-eight when I left."

"So I've been dead over seven hundred years," he says in a whisper so faint it is almost only a thought.

"Longer than that, probably. Our reservation was one of the most recent. What did you call the year when you lived?"

"I died in the twenty-first century. Does that mean anything to you?"

"No. I only know that the archaic age had their own reckonings for time. Religious ones, I think."

"Yes. Maybe you can tell me when the archaic age ended."

"I don't really know. I mean, I wasn't much interested in history. Do you know about the Maat?"

"No."

"Sometimes they're called neo-sapiens. They're what became of humanity after we mapped the human genome and amplified our intelligence."

"The next evolutionary step," Mister Charlie says with startled understanding. "The step we take for ourselves."

"That's right. They took that step well over a century before our reservation was founded. So you must have been dead for almost a thousand years."

Mister Charlie is silent, and Mei Nili does not disturb his profound quiet for a long moment. During the interminable time he had spent locked in the virtual space of the ore processor's command core, he has had ample time to mull over his past and visit with the ghosts of those he knew in his first lifetime, now all long dead. He has no regrets about leaving them behind, where they had wanted to stay. But knowing how long they have been ghosts, how long he has lain dormant awaiting this vital moment, pervades him with an appalling sense of his own transience. He yearns deeply for the return of his senses that he might grasp and smell and see the moment-by-moment reality he has traveled a thousand years to experience.

Mei's edginess becomes unbearable, and she must break the silence. "Do you wish now you hadn't frozen yourself?"

"No—no, not at all." He speaks in a hush, his awe palpable. "I knew there were great risks. I knew it might be frightful here. I—I wanted to see it for myself. I only wish now I had eyes."

"You will," Mei answers brightly. "And you'll have your whole body, too. The Vats in Solis will shape you just as you were—or with modifications, if you want."

"Solis—where is that?"

"On Mars. Not far from here. It's a human community. They strive to maintain the old values. They'll appreciate an old-timer like you."

"But the gravity—it's only a third of Earth gravity."

"Yes. You and I will be in the minority there. Most have taller, less dense bodies. They'll find us quite exotic."

Mars! he thinks, simultaneously astonished and panic-stricken. It was because he had wanted to see Mars, to see the *cities* on Mars, that he arranged to have his head frozen upon death, to Van Winkle enough time so that he would wake to see its wonders. And now, right here in his blind presence, is a woman of this scary and marvelous future, his one tenuous hope for a new life. "Why did you leave Earth?" he asks, suddenly seized with a desire to know everything about her.

Mei hesitates, not sure what to say. She feels foolish telling him about the personal tragedy that impelled her off-planet, for this archaic mind is from a time when mortality was the common truth. Mute, she stares at her square-knuckled hands, and the visitor from the past must ask again, "Were you unhappy there? Has the Earth changed a lot from my time? Would I recognize it?"

"Oh, yes," she blurts. "You'd recognize it. The Maat restored the planet. The oceans and forests and grasslands are as they were before the sprawl of the city-states."

"But where do the Maat live?"

"Underground. The villages on the reservations are the only artifacts on the planetary surface. Factories are located in space or on the Moon,

and the mines are out here in the Belt. No one really knows what the Maat are actually using the raw materials for. I mean, there's no sign of them on Earth. I guess their subterranean cities take some of the material. And here and there, in desolate places—in rift canyons, deserts and glacial peaks—you can find their crystals, big prismatic columns, a hundred meters tall. They're a mystery. Same with the Array. That's what everyone calls the Maat's massive project in trans-Neptunian orbit. It looks like some kind of patternless net, and it's built from the material that the numerous companies in the Belt and the gas planet systems garner for them. The actual construction is done by specialized andrones, artificial workers created by the Maat."

"What do they look like—the Maat, I mean?"

"Anything they want." Mei stands up and starts probing the switch box again with a stylus from her tool kit. "I'm going to try to hail my partner and see if he can get us out of here."

"Won't the others hear you?"

"They'll hear the signal, but the codes in the switch box will scramble it." She speaks to the com-link in her shoulder pad, "Munk—are you there?"

"You're still alive!" Munk's signal comes back immediately on the secure channel. "*Wolf Star* declared that *Aparecida* had killed you."

"It's a lie, Munk. We're okay, for now. What about you?"

"I had to swing wide to shake the destroyers *Wolf Star* deployed. But I'm free at the moment. Do you have Mister Charlie?"

"Yes."

"Can you get to the surface? I can pick you up in a drop-dead flyby. If I come in any slower, the destroyers will fix on me and there won't be any pickup at all."

"*Aparecida* has us locked in here."

"Take Mister Charlie and break for the surface. I will position myself for the flyby now and execute the drop-dead in twelve minutes."

"It's too risky, Munk. Detonate the damn explosives. We're safe in the command pod."

"You know I can't do that, Jumper Nili."

"Let your C-P program do it! If you don't, I'll work this switch box until I figure out the detonating sequence myself."

"That will take too long. It'll be hours before you crack the code, if then. *Wolf Star* will have computed the codes for themselves long before then. Make a break for the surface. I will pick you up."

"Munk—wait. Listen. There's something in you that's human. The Maat instilled that in you. I need that part of you to act for me—for Mister Charlie—right now."

"Jumper Nili—I'm positioning *The Laughing Life* for the flyby. Break for the surface."

The secure line cuts off, and Mei Nili disconnects from the switchbox with a curse. "Damn that bolt-dolt!"

"What is a drop-dead flyby?" Mister Charlie inquires.

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"It means he'll throw *The Laughing Life* at us and come in without any impulse power, engines dead, flying by momentum only. Because our ship is made from a substance called blackglass, it's virtually invisible in space. Without using the engines, the ship will offer no profile to *Wolf Star*. It will fly by undetected. All we have to do is be there to hop on."

Muttering bloodoaths, Mei straps on her jetpak, stalks to the frustum, and removes the plasteel case. "Can you still hear me?"

"Yes." He has no sensation at all of movement. He is simply in blind space, informed only by the nerve-induced sounds from the translator in the case. "What are you going to do?"

"We're going to try to outrun *Aparecida* to the surface," she mutters sullenly, fidgeting with the switch box, setting a brief lagtime on the portal control. "Just be grateful you don't have eyes to see this."

She takes the ovoid case in both arms and positions herself at the egress point and waits, gnawing her lower lip nervously. Her fear angers her. What is there to fear? That she will die? Everyone she loves is dead. They died unknowing, believing the mercies of their age. At least she will die with her eyes open. What of Mister Charlie? He died, too, once, believing in the mercies of an age to come. But there are no mercies. She knows that now. And when the door dilates, she screams her bitter rage and fires her jetpak.

On the com-link, Munk hears Jumper Nili's defiant cry and begins his drop-dead flyby. Mars glides past the viewport, small with distance, its sharp rays cutting the darkness like a star of blood. Its clear silence illuminates an uneasiness in the androne. What if *Aparecida* kills Mei Nili? The future becomes pointless then. Where can he go? Without the archaic brain, Solis will have nothing to do with him, and finding work in the Belt will be degrading, for none of the Commonality companies tolerate rogue behavior. To return to Apollo Combine or even Iapetus Gap where he began would mean certain ligature of his self-directive functions: His brain would be bound to a work governor that would inhibit all future independence.

That possibility is untenable to him, after the pleasure he has derived from his anthropic studies, which he would lose once his C-P program is shunted by a work governor. But the other options available to him seem little better. The best he could hope for would be to wander the Belt, seeking bandit operations, salvage jobs that he could get to first before any company vessels show up.

Even then, he would have to rely on markets outside the Commonality to credit him for the materials he salvaged. Then he would have to transfer his credits to independent brokers among the colonies so that they could be converted to the power cells he requires to continue functioning. At any time, he himself could be set upon by bandit salvagers or legitimate company crews who would be within their rights in dismantling him and brokering his components.

Of course, the Maat would grant him sanctuary from bandits and the

Commonality companies in Terra Tharsis, their vast community on Mars. They would take him in, their creation hammered out of nothing. They would accept him as they accept all who come into their communal presence, and he would be changed, as all are changed in the grand thetic fields of their recondite being, changed and made anew, no longer Munk but Munk-of-the-Maat, naked before the infinite, at the foot of the dream that mind has named existence—and he would be made again mysterious even to himself.

Fear twines in him at that prospect. Is this some subprogram installed by his creators? Perhaps. He does not want to dwell on it. The Maat are too strange to contemplate, and he would rather live as a bandit in the void than submit himself to their unknowable whims.

For a similar reason, Munk has not dared consider Jumper Nili's request that he override his primary programming and blow up Phoboi Twelve. If he does that, he compromises the only stability he has, the certainty of his own mental being. Carbon minds, having evolved from organic accidents, know madness. But the silicon mind is singular and thus secure from insanity. It is clarity itself, crystal become mind.

The andrones constructed by the Commonality are such truly pure silicon entities that they are incapable of defying their cybernetic natures. But a Maat construct, imbued with a contra-parameter program as he has been, is subject to the possibility of continual redefinition. Such randomness is the very threshold of madness.

Munk fears that. His primary program—to serve as a patrol and salvage drone for Iapetus Gap—was immutably altered by the activation of his C-P program—to acquire all the anthropic data he can. That diverted him from his work station in the Saturn ring system and brought him to Apollo Combine. Since then he has suffered flutter-gaps in his attention whenever he even so much as glimpses holo-images of the Rings or hears data-blurbs about the gas giants. Studying the anthropic psyche, he has learned that these attention gaps are experienced by people as pangs of remorse, guilt, nostalgia. Why, he has often wondered, have the Maat instilled such an inhibiting inefficiency in their creations?

Whatever the reason—if it can be called reason at all—Munk dreads all further deviation from his primary program. He has gone so far as to question the merit of his C-P interest in humans. Yet question is all he can do, since he is incapable of terminating his C-P file. As he cuts the magjets and commits *The Laughing Life* to its plunge toward Phoboi Twelve, he knows his fate is locked. Mei Nili will either be there with the archaic brain—or she will be dead.

A tendril of fern floats by, and he plucks it out of the air, enduring another flutter-gap in his attention. When he arrived in the Belt, this was the first bioform Munk saw. All the jumper ships are festooned with them—flowering lianas, crimson-leaved creepers, emerald bracken and glossy jade plants. His initial lesson in human behavior was to learn that the human psyche relishes the presence of this early ancestor.

He takes the fern leaf between his digits and marvels again at its

delicacy. The microvoltage of the phosphorylation of adenosine diphosphate to adenosine triphosphate in the cells' chlorophyll tingles his fingersensors when he feels for it. This is the photosynthetic process that evolved spontaneously billions of years ago on Earth, releasing the free oxygen that made the evolution of respiring organisms possible.

How eerie it seems to him that this being appeared automatically out of the molecular frenzy of life. No creature manufactured it as he was manufactured. It emerged of its own accord, nascent, replete. As did the archaic brain that Mei Nili carries in the plasteel case. Mister Charlie was not shaped in the Vats. His genetic structure manifested without benefit of Maat or androne guidance. And that fills Munk with wonder as he tunes into the code-privileged band of the com-link.

He hears nothing, for Mei has shut down her link. The static that fills the enclosed space is the thin wind of the sun nagging at the electrons of the ship's antenna. It is a cold and unfailing sound.

Mei Nili fires her jetpak and, with a whooping cry, is flung through the hatch of the command pod and across the vault, Mister Charlie hugged tight against her. Aparecida, squatting atop the pod, lashes her spiked tail at the streaking figure and misses.

Shooting through the smashed gap in the geodesic dome, Mei skids to a stop at the entry to the gigantic bore tunnel. A charred screech from the demolition androne sends Mei fleeing through the dark corridor, using short kicks from her jetpak to bound as far ahead as her cowl light permits her to see. She must find a vent that ascends to the surface. The plasteel case in her arms whispers through her com-link, "Mei Nili—Mei Nili—are you still with me?"

"Yes, Mister Charlie—I'm here. Calm down. I can't talk now. Aparecida is after us."

Mister Charlie hates not knowing what is happening. He wants to help, to participate in his own salvation, and he rakes his mind for some worthy counsel. "Do you have a weapon?"

"No. Nothing that would stop a demolition androne."

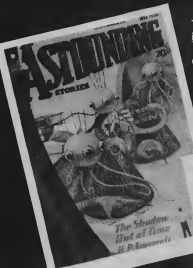
Mei dares not even glance behind. Her full attention is ahead of her, among the numerous escapes in the riven rock wall—the vent holes and sludge chutes. Some, she knows, must be dead ends, terminating in dross bins and catch chambers. Very few will lead to the surface. Desperately, she strives to bring forward in her memory the bore tunnel pattern that is the model for the ore processors she has helped install. But she has lost track of where she is in the tunnel.

Jarring vibrations quake the thin air with Aparecida's hammering stride, and the whipstroke whistle of her tentacles lashes its screeching echoes like a slicing siren. At any instant, Mei Nili expects a shatter-blow to slam her into blackness. Stifling her terror, she fixes her gaze on a likely cavity directly overhead. A tight burst of the jetpak launches her upward, and she curls about in midleap and slides into the opening feetfirst.

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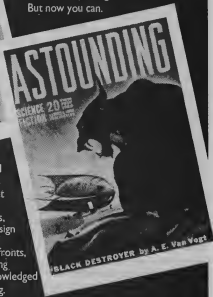
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Below her, she sees Aparecida lunge at the rockwall, talons biting into the stone, tentacles hoisting her along the sheered surface with weightless agility, her long head tilted back, fixing Mei with a pulsing, fireshadow glare.

"Where are we?" Mister Charlie asks. "What's happening now?"

Mei scuttles backward into the cavity, her fear coiling tighter with the rapid pounding of the androne's pursuit. Her panicked breaths fill her hearing.

"You're scared," Mister Charlie moans. "Tell me what's happening!"

"She's after us," Mei Nili manages. As fast as she elbows backward, the opening before her crumbles and the androne's tentacles reach closer. The rock-cracking noise of Aparecida's frenzied approach jars the roots of her teeth, and she chatters curses in a fury of fear and rage at herself that she entered the duct backward, succumbing to the temptation to see her pursuer. Now the tight space prohibits her from turning around and using her jetpak to propel her faster though the channel.

She fires her jetpak anyway and shoots through the loops of the blind tentacles and out of the duct, streaking past the blunt face and spiked claws of Aparecida. A razorflash of tentacles lariate after her, and she darts daringly into the blackness.

"What's that sound?" Mister Charlie presses. "Did we get away?"

Mei glances off the opposite wall and ricochets back into the darkness as Aparecida pounces swiftly on the space where she had been. Sizzling arcs of flogging tentacles drive Mei back and forth across the tunnel until her heart cannot pump oxygen out of her lungs fast enough and her strength no longer fits her muscles. With clambering, wobbly strides, she hauls herself up the broken face of the wall and heaves herself into the first opening she finds.

"Tell me what's happening!" Mister Charlie pleads, frightened by the gasping sounds of Mei's terrified exertion. "Where are we?"

Mei slaps off her com-link and tries to steady the raw fieriness of her breathing to get a grasp on where she is. The oblique angle of the narrow channel indicates it leads elsewhere than the surface. A wrenching roar kicks her deeper as Aparecida's powerful limbs burrow a larger entry. In moments, the androne will have sufficient rock debris to fire projectiles. Skidding forward with boosts from her jetpak as fast as she dares in the dark pipe, she roots her stamina in the hot current of her fear and finds the strength and clarity to push the plasteel case under her, down between her legs where she can clasp it with her ankles.

The first projectile whacks so hard against the case, her bones shudder, and she releases Mister Charlie. The plasteel case rolls backward down the pipe, but the next projectile smacks it back between her legs. Then the channel opens into a conveyor chute, and she tumbles out of the pipe.

Mei recognizes this chute as the same one she had followed earlier to the command pod. She eeks a distressed cry, knowing the chute only descends deeper into the asteroid. From here there is no chance of reaching the surface. Stabbing into the darkness with the light beam from her

cowl, she begins the climb toward the core chamber and the command pod, gnashing her frustration. The regularly spaced ducts in the chute wall all lead to the main bore tunnel, and entering them would be certain death, for Aparecida's heat-sensors would spot her at once. Her only hope now is to return quickly to the command pod before the androne can cut her off and trap her in the chute.

Employing all the alacrity she can muster from her weary muscles, she climbs along the cable track. With conveyor trucks before her and cables looping above, her jetpak affords her no help. She fights to quiet her breathing so she can hear the danger ahead, while at the same time she demands fierce haste from her legs. Each sinewy second that she lags decreases her chance of getting out of the chute before Aparecida blocks her way.

A truck mounded with cinders appears out of the dark, and she cat-scrambles over it, vaulting the gap to the next truck. The plasteel case in her arms bobs clumsily, and she hopes that the blows it took in the pipe haven't damaged its precious interior. She considers flicking on her com-link to contact Mister Charlie but at that moment notices the blue glow from the power coils at the end of the chute.

Safeguarding her already wrenching heart from the excitement of making good her escape, she steadily keeps her alertness on her balancing leaps along the crests of the trucks. Her breath inadequate, her legs leaden, she won't relent, hoping she can reach the mouth of the chute and fire her jetpak. But as she reaches the last truck, her jouncing stride breaks at the sight of a blurred, groping tentacle.

Mei ducks behind the truck as Aparecida swarms into the conveyor chute, limbs thrashing. The truck whangs loudly with the impact, and the whole linkage is shoved deeper into the chute, knocking the plasteel case from her grasp. Tentacles scything above her, Mei ducks lower, her hands working furiously to uncouple the end truck. The pin jumps out, and she snatches the plasteel case from the ground and clutches it hard to her chest as she throws her jetpak to full throttle.

The force of the thrust hurls Mei, the cinder-laden truck and the demolition androne across the giant vault toward the geodesic dome. Spewing ash, the jet-powered truck hurtles through the ripped gap in the dome, shoving Aparecida ahead of it and crashing violently into the towering column of a power coil. Lightning rigs a thundery harp between the smashed coil and the vault's dark peak, and clots of blue fire geyser through the chamber and crawl wildly over the naked ground.

Mei tumbles free of the collision and scrabbles with quavery legs toward the open portal of the command pod. Throwing off the dented truck, Aparecida leaps after her. A scourging hiss rips the air as tapers of steel claw the air at Mei's back. Flung forward again by her jetpak, Mei bounds with shock fright into the command pod, drops the plasteel case, and throws herself at the switch box.

The portal wrinkles shut before Aparecida's flailing blades narrow close enough to find flesh, and Mei collapses in a quaking heap. Three

hot raps vibrate through the pod and then silence but for her frantic breathing. She gropes for the com-link in her shoulderpad and splutters, "Mister Charlie?"

"Mei Nili!" Mister Charlie is agog with fear. When she cut him off, he was sure Aparecida had killed her and he was on his way to the dissector. "I—I thought. . . . Are you all right?"

"Yes," she gasps.

"What happened? Where are we?"

"We're back—back in the pod."

"What about Aparecida? Is she still after us?"

"Yes. My escape—I couldn't get away. I had to come back."

"We're still trapped?"

"For now." Mei pushes herself to her feet and leans against the switch box. Her fear-buzzing fingers steady only under the greatest concentration, and she manages to transmit a hailing frequency to *The Laughing Life*. But there is no response. From that she knows that the cruiser is either destroyed or maintaining strict silence because it has drifted within striking range of *Wolf Star*. "We'll have to wait awhile before Munk can contact us again."

"What are you going to do?"

Mei picks up the plasteel case and notes the smudges where Aparecida's projectiles impacted. An open, lonely feeling—a tender sense of vulnerability—replaces the dazed and jangled aftermath of her terror-stricken flight. This remarkable being—a *man* from a lost era a thousand years gone—has been reduced to this—an object of barter, useful as an ore factory controller or a shield—a *thing* that she has risked her life to steal. "You've got your ears, Mister Charlie. Now I'm going to give you your eyes."

"You can do that?"

"I think so." She places the case back in the crystal frustum and returns to the switch box. By channeling to Mister Charlie the input from the light sensors in the ceiling that monitor the interior of the pod she opens for him a rainbow-tinted vision.

"I can see! It looks like I'm floating above you."

"There are ground level light sensors, too," Mei says. "I'll connect you to them as well. These are what the jumpers use to scrutinize the controller plates by remote."

"Yes! I've found the reflex. I can will it myself now."

"There are also light sensors outside the pod. If you try. . . ."

"There it is," he says in a cold whisper. "Is *that* Aparecida? She's huge—grotesque—"

"What is she doing?"

"Squatting in front of me. She's got these thick, barbed cables waving slowly around her—and her face—it's. . . ."

"I know. We've met."

"How long can we stay in here?"



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"Not long. *Wolf Star* will break the codes soon and then usurp control of the pod."

"What are we going to do?"

Mei smiles, and the sensation is so unfamiliar it startles her and opens her lungs to a giddy sigh.

"Why are you laughing?"

"Mister Charlie, you said 'we.' I just think it's funny that we're in this together—me and a thousand-year-old man."

"Actually, Mei Nili, I'm scared shitless, as we used to say in my time."

"I am, too, Mister Charlie. I am, too. And for a long time I wasn't." She settles to the floor and leans back against the jetpak. "For a long time I really didn't care if I lived or died."

"You were depressed. Why?"

"That doesn't matter. It would sound silly to you—a man who already died once, who lived in a time when everyone had to die."

"You lost someone you love," Mister Charlie surmises.

"I lost everyone I love. They weren't supposed to die. No one is supposed to die where I come from."

"That doesn't sound silly to me. I tried to escape death myself. But after what I've been through—crammed in here, forced to work as a machine-slave—I would rather die than go back to that. Cowardly as that must seem, that is what's happened to me. Really, though, at bottom the only courage that is demanded of us is to go on living."

"For what? Simply to exist?"

"No. That's vile. But look at you, Mei Nili. You *are* beautiful. And you've told me that everyone is beautiful now. Disease, old age, distortion are done with and, at last, humanity attains the physical dignity that before we could only claim in spirit."

"That was the spirit I left Earth to find. Physical dignity is not enough, Mister Charlie."

"No, I suppose not. Much as I hate to admit it, the old philosophers were right. We sing best in our chains. Even so—I would love to taste some of the freedom humanity has won in the thousand years since I had a body. Is there any hope we can get away to that place you told me of—to Solis—where they will shape a new body for me?"

Mei shrugs disconsolately. "Only if we can convince Munk to override his primary programming and detonate the explosives."

"Patch me into *The Laughing Life*. Let me talk with him."

"He won't listen to you. He's an androne."

"Yet when he first contacted me he introduced himself as something more—a rogue androne with what he called contra-parameter programming installed by the Maat. He's capable of free will."

"Not if he can help it," Mei says with a gleam of anger.

"Then we have to make it necessary. We have to give him no choice but to use his freedom."

"I don't understand."

"Mei Nili—you gambled your life to save me. I know that serves your

self-interest. You need me to gain entry to Solis for yourself. Yet if you want, you can surrender me to Aparecida this minute and your life will be spared. You can go on living."

"I didn't come this far to give up. If I have to die now, at least I won't be running away from life—which is what I was doing before."

"I'm glad to hear you say that. There's a chance then that we can get out of here. But we'll have to gamble our lives. Are you willing?"

"What do I have to do?"

"Let me talk to Munk."

Mei pushes to her feet. At the switch box, she finds that the transmission circuit is already active, and Munk's voice is droning, "... hear me? Respond, Jumper Nili."

"Munk! We're back in the pod. We couldn't make it to the surface."

"Jumper Nili—I was ready to believe you were dead."

"We will be soon, Munk, if you don't help us."

"Jumper Nili, don't ask—"

"It's not me this time that's asking."

"Munk? This is Charles Outis speaking. Can you hear me?"

"Who?" the androne asks. "There's noise in your transmission I can't decipher."

"This is Mister Charlie. Do you hear me?"

"I hear you, Mister Charlie. I regret we have not been able to liberate you just yet."

"You can liberate me, Munk. Detonate the explosives immediately."

"I can't do that, Mister Charlie."

"You can—and you must. Mei Nili is going to open the pod entry now. If you don't detonate the explosives at once, Aparecida will destroy us. Do you understand?"

Mei Nili's heart surges, and she turns with shock from the switch box.

"Jumper Nili—do not do this. I will swing about for another drop-dead flyby. Try again to evade Aparecida and get to the surface."

In her astonishment, Mei says nothing. This is it. The clarity of Mister Charlie's decision penetrates her, and all the lorn and muddled raging that had carried her from Earth to this lifeless rock lifts away. Tears come quietly to her eyes.

"Jumper Nili!"

Mei blinks away her tears and nods toward the sensors, holding Mister Charlie's gaze and not quite smiling. "I'm setting a ten second lag on the pod entry, Munk. If Mister Charlie and I are going to survive, it's entirely up to you."

"Jumper Nili, I will use the codes to countermand your portal control."

Mei tugs a small pliers from her tool kit and inserts it in the switch box with a deft twist. "I've cut the code link to the portal. You can't stop it now. It will open in ten seconds. Our lives are in your hands, Munk."

"Don't do it, Jumper Nili."

Mei sets the timer and retreats down the aisle of controller panels. She

removes her jetpak and sets it beside her on the floor. "Get us out of here, Munk."

"Help us!" Mister Charlie calls.

In *The Laughing Life*, Munk pulls away from the command console abruptly, as though it has become white hot. He stands erect, suspended by his conflict in a bitter, utter stillness. Ten seconds for a silicon mind is ten eternities in which to dwell on the permutations of the future. Munk locks into a frozen logic loop: If he does nothing, Mei and the archaic human will be lost forever—yet if he detonates the explosives, he will have defied his primary programming and he will—forever after—endure the claims of insanity, of loss of guided control, of uncertainty in his own behavior.

There are no feelings to guide him. If he trusts his C-P programming, he will detonate the explosives and destroy not only Phoboi Twelve and Aparecida but also his identity as an androne. If he does not act, there will be no grief, no remorse, no sadness at the loss of an archaic human. He will go on, a rogue androne, salvaging errant mining equipment to earn the credits necessary to replenish his power cells. Eventually, he will meet other jumpers, add their interviews to his developing anthropic model, and so continue to fulfill the inner directive of his creators.

In the tenth second, Munk decides to leave his primary programming intact. The uncertainty of existing without it is the most puissant emotion he has ever experienced, and he crouches over the command console and turns *The Laughing Life* away from Phoboi Twelve.

Over the com-link he hears the shouts of Jumper Nili and Mister Charlie as the portal opens and Aparecida comes for them. The wildness of their anguished yells pierces deep into his C-P program. He adds that to his anthropic model. And then he hears the gusty roar of the jetpak. Jumper Nili has launched it ahead of her. He can tell, for it dopplers away from her shimmering cries, thuds loudly and whines to a stop. She has struck Aparecida with it, driven the androne back a few paces, and purchased herself two, maybe three, extra seconds.

Such resistance is absurd, he thinks—and realizes, of course, such absurdity is the very source of being human—to live and strive simply to live and strive—even for a few extra seconds—to go on living and to make the laws according to which one lives—to program oneself—which, to the androne, is madness and yet something more, a willfulness to set one's own limits in a universe where there is no real edge to anything, where the interpenetration of cosmic energies and molecular flow and accidents creates an eternal flux despite all programming, all structures, all the crystallizations of the silicon mind, even those seemingly impenetrable sanctuaries of purpose, identity and safety created by the Maat.

And, all at once, Munk's plight ends. Though he still does not understand, he comprehends why the Maat put a human heart inside his androne bulk. They never intended him to be human, only to be as free

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as a human—as free and as absurd. Without hesitation, he generates the firing codes for the bore-drill explosives and sends the detonating signal.

Mei Nili is hunched among the controller plates, gawking in horror with Mister Charlie as Aparecida casts aside the crumpled shape of the jetpak and springs toward them. Her prodigious head slung forward in a gaze of flamecored mineral intensity, tentacles slithering ahead of her steely, clacking claws, she is death itself.

A searing flare of white fire bleaches the androne to a skeletal silhouette and consumes her in a wincing radiance blind as any darkness, and she vanishes like a tattered shadow into the wraith-world of all nightmares.

The portal reflexively squeezes shut under the blast. The brunt of the shockwave tosses Mei Nili against the far wall with a sickening thud, and she slumps lifelessly into a loose-limbed float, a cast-adrift body in the reduced gravity.

"Mei Nili!" Mister Charlie bawls, and then, "Munk! Munk, are you there? Mei Nili's hurt! Hurry!"

Munk receives the distress signal from nearby, where he has watched the silent holocaust billow into fiery tatters. He steers *The Laughing Life* into the infrared haze to recover the scorched command pod. Resorting at once to his primary programming, he ignores the emotional valence in Mister Charlie's message and calmly guides the cruiser through the debris of the explosion. The heavily-damaged *Wolf Star* has swiftly retreated, dwindling to a bright star in the galactic haze, leaving behind pewter shards of fused blackglass, twisted finjets, mangled hull plates, and melted shapes of plasteel among the rapidly cooling dust cloud that is all that remains of Phoboi Twelve.

The command pod itself has separated into several heat-tarnished spheres whirling doomful and mute as absolute rock among the cosmic dust. Munk gently docks *The Laughing Life* against the sphere emitting Mister Charlie's signal. The controller plates recognize the company vessel, and the pod mates its portal to the cruiser's pressure hatch and accepts Munk with an inrush of heated air.

Mister Charlie, unprepared for the sight of the bulky humanoid with the chrome hood and featureless faceplate, utters a weak groan. "Munk?"

"Yes," the androne replies, hurrying to Mei Nili's body. "Have no fear. The danger for you is over, Mister Charlie."

Munk checks the oxygen content and pressure of the air mix in the pod as well as the temperature to be certain that they are adequate to sustain human life, and assured of that, he unzips Mei Nili's statskin cowl. His thick hand hovers a centimeter above her face, not only attempting to measure her rate of respiration but also at venture, daring for the first time to touch human flesh.

His sensors can detect no gas exchange at all. His first contact is to the side of her neck, trepidatiously feeling for her carotid pulse. None. "She is dead."

"No!" Mister Charlie cries. "She's not dead. Not yet. It's only been a few minutes. You've got to start her breathing. Do you understand?"

"How?" From his memory allocation files, Munk filters cardiopulmonary therapies.

"Force air into her lungs—"

Swiftly, the androne positions her under him on the deck, his fist placed over her nose and mouth, his finger pistoning air into her lungs. A vigorous thoracic massage follows as he pumps her ribcage with his fingertips, feeling her bones stressing to their breakpoint. He considers applying a small electric jolt, when her heart thumps back to life and she gasps for breath.

Mei shudders alert, peering up blearily at the crimson lens-bar in the black faceplate, and she feels the bright magnetic touch of his living metal against her flesh. Alertness jams into place as he lifts his electric presence from her and she takes in the intersecting crystal plates and mirror-gold concavity of the pod.

And then, quite unexpectedly, she finds herself blinking at the kneeling androne with tears welling in her eyes. It is as if everything she had ever refused to reckon with, the sadness and loneliness, is trying to rise within her involuntarily and all at once, overflowing from her as much in release as in pain. Awareness of the blackness that has relinquished her under the androne's ministrations taps into the very source of her grief.

To Munk's amazement, she begins to sob. He finds it incredible that this molten grief could have churned inside her for so long without finding a way out, that she had to literally die before it found relief. In the formless nothing where she has just been, the androne realizes, everyone she had ever loved had gone. And now she has been there, too—and come back.

"Welcome to the club," Mister Charlie says with quiet exultation. "Welcome to the survivor's club."

In the wash of air from *The Laughing Life*, strands of fern and a white blossom have drifted. Munk sweeps them into his grasp and presents them to Mei. "To life."

She accepts the bouquet with a quavery smile. "To Solis."

Installed in the flight bubble of *The Laughing Life*, Mister Charlie sees and hears through the ship's sensors. While he scrutinizes the interior of the vessel, amazed to be alive *inside* a magjet cruiser, even more amazed at the ambit of his own hazardous destiny that has delivered him from the darkness of the machine, Mei Nili and Munk talk. Vaguely, the thousand-year-old mind listens to the androne and the woman struggle with their relief and the joy of their success while they discuss what lies ahead—the brief flight to Mars and how it will be necessary to abandon *The Laughing Life* in a high orbit. The cruiser is the property of Apollo Combine and the only way to avoid the company's legal claim on them is to leave the cruiser behind. They will all go down to Mars in

the pod and will slow their entry with a jetpak rig they'll hook up from the ship's stores.

While they carefully plot the immediate future, Charles Outis gazes at the macramé of vines and roistering ferns spilling from ceiling nooks. He is quietly astonished to see them dangling here among the mysterious alloys of the transparent hull, wavering with the vent-breeze in the aqueous glow from the crystal devices of the console. To him, the plants are weary and beggared lifeforms, surviving on the merest offerings, yet noble in the poverty of radiation, thin air and meager dirt that sustain them. Of course they would accompany humanity into space. From their cellular struggles, human life slowly and violently evolved and stands before him now as this beautifully pale and dark-haired woman chattering gratefully. By comparison, the androne beside her, holding her steady in the empty gravity, seems a divinity, silverly black and ceremonial, a faceless apparition of a higher order, a more ideal actuality, that has emerged from her even more distinctly than she emerged from the genetic turmoil of the plants' early lives.

The archaic human stares at them tirelessly, scrutinizing these three orders of reality arrayed before him—ancestral, human, and noetic—and as the fourth, the ghost witness of the past, an obscure soul without a body, he experiences for the first time in this calamitous and unreckonable future some emotion other than fear.

Mister Charlie stares ahead through the prow's sensors at the swelling vista of Mars. The awe that had begun for him when he first woke from his long, cold sleep steepens at the view of the orange-red deserts and rows of dead volcanoes. As the cruiser glides closer to the rimlands of smeared lava flats and scoria, he sees the famous veins of dried riverbeds that he remembers from the Viking photographs of his former life a millennium ago. The rumor of floods chamfering the rusty plains, grooving the reddish black slurry floors with the toilings of water, fans out and melts away into the dark amber glass of alien mantle beds.

And, suddenly, there it is, in the chancre of a crater surrounded by burned-out cindercones—an immense and gleaming city! Astonishment expands to a worshipful feeling in his archaic brain, for here is the justification of his gamble and his suffering—the triumphant faith of the vision he had died and been reborn to see. Set like a strange jewel in the barren plains and stark promontories of the dead planet, the city is woven of radiance. Its gold and onyx spires twinkle with sunfire and emerald spurs of laserlight, its dazzling foundations sunk in the bedrock of the future's hewn and ancient-riven altar of Mars. ●

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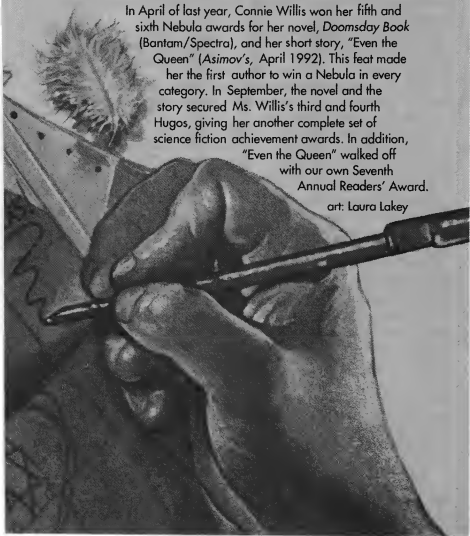
Connie Willis

In April of last year, Connie Willis won her fifth and sixth Nebula awards for her novel, *Doomsday Book* (Bantam/Spectra), and her short story, "Even the Queen" (Asimov's, April 1992). This feat made

her the first author to win a Nebula in every category. In September, the novel and the story secured Ms. Willis's third and fourth Hugos, giving her another complete set of science fiction achievement awards. In addition,

"Even the Queen" walked off with our own Seventh Annual Readers' Award.

art: Laura Lakey



The meeting was at Gabe's, and I'd told everybody to be there at three, but Sara was the only one on time.

"John can't come," Gabe said. "He had to go to Patmos."

"Is he sending somebody from the Planning Committee then?" I said. We had a lot of decisions to make, and the Planning Committee always has a fit if you don't follow their plans to the letter.

"He didn't say whether he was or not," Gabe said.

"What about everybody else?" I said. "Where's Raquel? And Rafe?"

Gabe shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. Nobody else has called to say they couldn't come, and you know Phaniel and his buddies. They're always late."

"I know," I said. The three of them have never made it to any of my meetings on time, and that time they were supposed to run up to Mamre and tell Abraham's wife she was pregnant, they were so late she was eighty-five years old by the time they got there.

But Rafe is usually early. And prepared. And has actually done everything he was supposed to, which was why I'd put him in charge of Publicity. And now he wasn't here either.

"It's three-fifteen," I said. "Where *are* they?"

"Don't get in a tailspin," Gabe said. "So they're a few minutes late. It's not the end of the world. They'll get here pretty soon." He turned to Sara. "Can I get you anything, Saraquael?"

She shook her head.

"Michael?" he said to me.

"The rest of the committee," I said glumly.

"Yeah," Sara said, tapping her foot. "I wish they'd get here so we could get started. I've got to leave at four."

At four. Wonderful. "Where *are* they?" I said. "Don't they realize this thing is only two weeks away, and we're not even half ready? We don't have a place booked, we don't have the programs printed, we haven't even started on the decorations—"

"Oh, that reminds me," Saraquael said, leafing through her daily planner, "I had a question about the seating." She leafed some more and pulled out a piece of paper. "It says in the Planning Committee's report there are supposed to be twenty-four seats for the elders 'round about the throne.' What does 'round about' mean exactly? Are they supposed to be on the sides or in front or what? It doesn't say."

Which is why the Planning Committee should be here, I thought, instead of traipsing off to Patmos. "On the sides," I said. "If they don't like it, they can change it."

"On the sides," Saraquael said, writing it down. "I hope that won't get in the way of the rainbow."

"Rainbow?" I said.

"The rainbow 'round about the throne, in sight like unto an emerald,'" she said, reading from the instructions again. "You have no idea how much trouble I had finding a green rainbow. I had to go to five different places, and the only one they had was huge. I'm afraid if the elders sit on the sides the rainbow will be right on top of them."

"Have them sit in the front, then," I said.

"Okay," she said. "No, that won't work. The Seven Lamps of Fire are in front. How about if they sit *behind* the throne?"

"Fine," I said. "Why don't you go ahead and report on the decorations, since you have to leave early?"

"Okay," she said, fishing for another set of papers. "Okay, well, I've got the rainbow and—"

"Sorry I'm late," Phanuel said. "Uriel and Penemue and I got stuck at Sodom. They'll be here in a few minutes."

"Can I get you anything?" Gabe said.

"No, I'm fine." He sat down. "What did I miss?"

"Saraqael's making her report on the decorations. Go ahead, Sara."

"Okay, well, I've got the rainbow, and the seats for the elders. I don't have the seats for the choir yet because I didn't know how many we needed."

"Who's in charge of the choir?" I asked.

"Penemue," Phanuel said. "He should be here any minute."

"We'll do the choir when he gets here," I said. "Go ahead."

"Okay, well, I've got the rainbow and the seats for the elders and the seven lamps—" She stopped and frowned at the paper. "You know, if I moved the lamps closer to the throne, the elders could sit in front of them. I hate to have them in back where they can't see anything."

"Fine," I said. "Whatever. Go on."

"Okay, and I've got—"

"Sorry I'm late," Uriel said.

"Can I get you anything?" Gabe said.

"No, that's okay," Uriel said, sitting down. "I got stuck talking to Lot's wife. You know how she is. I couldn't get away. Are we to Programming yet?"

"No," I said. "Saraqael's reporting on the decorations." I nodded at her to start.

"Okay, well, I've got the rainbow—" she said.

"And the lamps and the chairs for the elders," I said quickly. "What about the Book of the Judgments?"

"Yeah," she said, "'written within and on the back side and sealed with seven seals.' I don't have the wax for the seven seals yet. I didn't know what color you wanted me to get."

"Red," Phanuel said.

"Black," Uriel said at the same time.

"What does the Planning Committee report say?" I asked.

"It doesn't," Sara said. "I was kind of thinking gold to go with the crowns and the trumpets."

"Fine," I said. "Gold."

"Shouldn't there be a motion?" Phanuel said.

No, I thought, but I said, "Sure. Do I have a motion that the wax for the seals be gold?"

"I so move," Sara said.

"I second," Gabe said.

"Discussion?" I said.

"I think black would be more appropriate than gold," Uriel said. "After all, the breaking of the seals is supposed to signal the coming of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse."

"Or red," Phanuel said. "To go with the moon's turning to blood. And one of the horses is red, isn't it? Death or something?"

"War's red," Gabe said. "Death is a pale horse, pale rider."

"What does 'a pale horse' mean?" Sara said. "White, or a palomino, or what?"

"Gray," Uriel said.

"White," Gabe said.

"It can't be white," Phanuel said. "Famine's horse is white."

Penemue came in. "You guys went off without me," he said. "I thought you said we were all going to meet at Gomorrah and come over together."

"Can I get you anything?" Gabe said.

"I waited for half an hour for you guys," Penemue said. "It was like a furnace." He sat down. "What are we talking about?"

"The seven seals," Uriel said. "What color do you think they should be?"

"Blue," he said.

"Blue?" Uriel said.

"Why in heaven's name blue?" Phanuel said.

"I like blue," he said.

"There's a motion on the table," I said. "All those in favor of the seals being gold say aye."

Gabe and Sara voted aye. Uriel, Phanuel, and Penemue voted nay, which meant it was a tie. I said, "Sara, get in touch with the Planning Committee and ask them what they want," which I should have said in the first place. "Do you have anything else to report?"

She shook her head.

"Good. Publicity?"

"That's Rafe," Gabe said.

Which I knew. I was getting rattled. It was three forty-five and we

weren't even halfway through the committee reports. "Entertainment," I said.

"I forgot to bring my list," Penemue said. "Do you want me to go get it?"

"No," I said. "Do you have the judgments lined up?"

"That's Programming's job," he said. "I was in charge of getting the seraphim and the four horsemen."

"Do you have them?"

"All but Pestilence. And does anybody have a pair of scales that Famine can carry?"

"I've got a pair of scales for measuring the hills and the mountains, but I think they'd be too big," Gabe said.

"What about the balance Nebuchadnezzar was weighed in?" Phanuel said. "Isn't that around somewhere?"

"I think Daniel has it," Uriel said. "I'll ask him."

"Good," I said. "And you've got the seraphim?"

"Yes. They wanted to know what they were supposed to wear."

"White raiment," Sara said. "That's what everybody else is wearing, the elders and the souls that were slain for the word of God and the choir. Speaking of which, I need to know how many chairs the choir's going to need."

"Penemue?" I said.

He shuffled through a tangle of papers. "I must have left my list at home."

"I just need to know about how many," Sara said.

"Sorry I'm late," Rafe said, coming in with his arms full of notebooks and rolled-up maps. "Jacob insisted on arm-wrestling me. And then, after I got rid of him, Satan called. He wanted to know who we want for the Antichrist." He turned to me. "And he said to tell you that if you haven't reserved Armageddon, you'd better do it fast because it's already booked for the whole month of January."

"That's the Facilities Committee's job," I said. "Does anybody know if Baradiel's done that?"

Everybody shook their heads. "He said he was going to try to call sometime this week," Sara said, "but he was pretty busy."

I asked Rafe, "Did Satan have any suggestions for the Antichrist?"

"The usual. Deng. Yasser. Woody."

"What about the Saddam Hussein?" Gabe said, "He'd be perfect."

"I already asked him," Rafe said. "He refused to cooperate. He accused me of being from the U.N."

"It's too bad the Republicans aren't still in office," Penemue said.

"There's always the British press," Phanuel said. "Or Rush Limbaugh."

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"Why does it have to be a man?" Sara said. "Women are capable of wicked powers and blasphemies, too."

"Name one," Penemue said.

"I don't know. Leona Helmsley. Hillary Rodham Clinton. Amy Fisher. I just don't think we should automatically assume it's got to be a man."

"Amy Fisher?" Uriel said. "I hardly think trying to kill your boyfriend's wife qualifies you for the position of Head Beast."

"He claims he wasn't her boyfriend," Gabe said.

"And you *believe* that?" Phanuel said.

I grabbed one of Rafe's rolled-up maps and whacked the table with it. "Hark!" I said. "We're getting way off track here. The issue is the Antichrist."

"How anybody could possibly believe Joey Buttafuoco didn't—" Phanuel said.

"What about Dick?" Phanuel said. "I heard he's been making a comeback."

"What about Ron?" Sara said. "Or Nancy? Why do you always automatically assume it should be a man?"

"Or Nancy's astrologer?" Penemue said.

This was getting us nowhere. "Rafe," I said, "you and Azazel meet with Satan and choose somebody."

"I think there should be at least one female on the committee," Sara said. "Otherwise, they're going to automatically—"

"And Sara," I said hastily. "Where were we?" I said, looking at my notes. "Never mind. Rafe, give us your report on the Publicity Committee."

"Okay," Rafe said, opening one of his thick notebooks. "Everything's pretty much taken care of. I've got famines in the Sudan, Zambia, and Somalia, and plenty of wars."

"What about rumors of wars?"

He opened another notebook. "North Korea, South Africa, the occupied territories, and Macedonia, unless they decide to change their flag. I've gotten barcode scanners put in all the grocery stores, the EC currency's coming along nicely, and the ozone hole's expanding. As far as plagues go, we've got more than enough: cholera, resistant TB, AIDS, and an outbreak of diphtheria, unless Clinton pushes his health plan through."

"It is too bad the Republicans aren't still in office," Penemue muttered.

"Earthquakes," Rafe said, reading from the notebook. "Nicaragua, eastern Japan, Poland, and Corvallis, Oregon. San Francisco's all set up, but we're saving that for the week before. Oh, and I've arranged for Pinatubo to erupt again."

I knew I could count on Rafe. I relaxed a little. Maybe we'd be ready

in time after all. "All right, so the publicity's done, Rafe and his subcommittee are going to get an Antichrist, the decorations are all set—"

"Except for the choir seating," Sara said. "And the elders. I've been thinking, it's not going to work to have the elders in front of the throne even if I do move the lamps because you won't be able to see the angel opening the seven seals."

"Can't they sit on the sides?" Rafe said.

"No," Sara said. "I explained that before you got here. There's no room with the rainbow."

"Why do they have to be onstage at all?" Phanuel said. "Why can't they sit out in the audience?"

"Because they have to accompany the choir on their harps. Speaking of which, you never did tell me the number of chairs," she said to Penemue.

"Yeah, well, I wanted to discuss that with the committee before I signed up any more. I thought maybe we should consider scaling the choir back a little. Tens of thousands and thousands upon thousands is an awful lot of costumes, and, like Sara says, the stage is already pretty crowded."

"How many do you have lined up?" I said.

"This is a really busy time of year, what with New Year's and all. And I haven't heard from Baradiel. He had S through Z."

"How many do you have?" I said.

"Quite a few didn't think we should sing the Hallelujah Chorus. They say it's been done to death."

"How many?"

"Actual commitments or possibles?"

"Actual commitments."

He checked his list, ticking off names with his finger. "Four."

"Four?" I said.

"Quite a few others have expressed an interest. They said they'd get back to us as soon as they checked their calendars. I'm pretty sure they'll do it—"

"And how many would that make?"

He counted again. "Eight."

"Eight?!" Sara said. "It's only two weeks away!"

"Maybe we should consider postponing it a couple of weeks," Gabe said.

"We can't postpone," Rafe said. "The publicity's already out there. What about my signs and portents? What about Macedonia?"

Uriel waved his hand. "There are always wars and rumors of wars. Nobody'll even notice."

"Maybe we should cancel it altogether and try again next year," Sara said. "That way we'd have plenty of time to get a choir together and come

up with the last Horseman, and we might have more to choose from in the way of an Antichrist."

"If we wait *four* years," Penemue said, "the Republicans'll be back in office."

"We're not canceling," I said. "We've already postponed this thing twice, and we're not doing it again. What we *are* going to do is get organized. Sara, you order the wax for the seven seals. Gold," I added before she could say anything. "Penemue, you find somebody for Pestilence. Rafe, take care of the Antichrist and get San Francisco ready to go. The rest of you are going to have to help recruit choir members. We're going to meet again Thursday, and I want everybody to have at least ten thousand apiece by then."

"I can't meet Thursday," Penemue said. "I've got an appointment with Balaam's donkey."

"What about Friday?" I said.

"Hunh unh," Sara said. "Friday's no good. How about Wednesday morning?"

"That won't give us enough time to line up the choir," Phanuel said. "How about next Wednesday?"

"That's the earthquake," Rafe said.

I looked at my calendar. Sunday was out. "How about Monday?"

"That won't work either," Rafe said. "I'm pouring out vials of wrath upon the earth that whole day. And that reminds me, I don't think anybody's done anything about the Great Day of Wrath. Who was supposed to be in charge of that?"

"Programming," Phanuel said.

"Publicity," Penemue said.

"Entertainment," Uriel said.

"Do you mean to tell me that *no one* is in charge of Wrath?!"

"Now don't go getting in a tailspin," Gabe said. "I'm sure *somebody's* in charge of it."

"Wouldn't it be Facilities' job?" Sara said. "I mean, it's mountains and rocks and things. Oh, my heavens, look what time it is. I've got to go." She grabbed up her daily planner and went flying off.

"So do I," Rafe said, gathering up his maps. "Satan said he was going to call back."

"And we were supposed to be at the Ladder Climb an hour ago," Phanuel said. He and Uriel and Penemue took off.

"We didn't schedule another meeting," Rafe said.

"I know," I said.

"Well, call me when you decide when it is. And let me know if you need help with anything else."

I watched him ascend, and then sat there awhile, staring at my notes.

"Can I get you anything?" Gabe said.

"We're going to have to cancel," I said. "We don't have an Antichrist or a Pestilence. Nobody's in charge of the Great Day of His Wrath. We don't have a dragon or a Wormwood or a bottomless pit. All we have is a heavenly quartet."

"Now don't go getting in a tailspin again," Gabe said. "It'll all come together. And what if we do have to cancel? It's not the end of the world." ●



SLEEPING WITH THE DINOSAURS

to Jack Horner

In the Black Hills,
Soil millennia built,
Wind and rain have taken.
To walk that starved earth is to go
Where dinosaurs have gone.
Sometimes after a storm,
The ravaged body of gulch or mesa
Will reveal a dinosaur's
Sixty-five million year sleep,
Bones fetally curved,
As if in death, nativity returned.
At the site, denim clad paleontologists
Attend the rebirthing,
Pass forceps and callipers,
A loving labor to lift and wash
Each precious shaft and knob
That the bones be knit again.
In late afternoon light
A man, like a lover, lies down
Next to the giant's ribcage
And gently cuts placental earth from beneath.
It is as if he, too, sleeps;
And I am reminded
That in time not too distant
We'll all be sleeping with the dinosaurs.

—Sandra J. Lindow

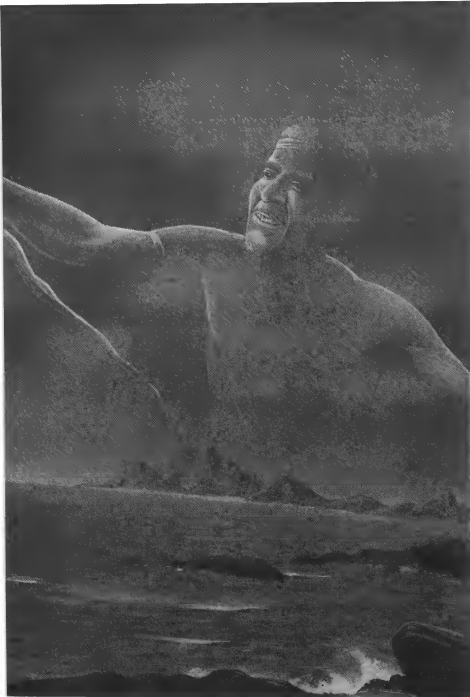
EDGE OF THE WIND

Steven Utley

Anita thought that a Caribbean cruise
was a desirable gift—a gift that might
change the course of her life

art: George Krauter





The road wound through thick jungle. The driver chattered happily about the island's natural splendors and seemed to know his botany, for he would nod and point and say, "That is breadfruit," or "Poinsettia," or "Gommier." Anita, who felt barely competent to distinguish grass from trees, would dutifully look, only to see the same dark threatening wall of greenery.

"We grow everything good to eat," said the driver. "Banana, orange, pimento. Cocoa for the chocolate. And smell that good smell." She did detect traces of something pleasant in the car's hot-motor-and-old-upholstery atmosphere. "Every spice you want grows right here. Cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves, mace."

From time to time, they passed through clearings, and she saw huts and dark-skinned people whose expressions communicated nothing. One old man agitatedly shook a stick adorned with feathers and bones. She stared until the car had rounded a bend in the road, then asked MacLeish, seated beside her, "What was that all about?"

"Island magic," he said mildly. "Some disgruntled islander just tried to wish us away."

"Why?"

MacLeish's beard framed a grin. "Maybe he spotted us for Americans. Maybe he just hates white people generally." He called to the driver. "What do you think?"

The driver did not look around. "Could be, boss."

"The matter of race," MacLeish said, "goes back centuries. The matter of Americans goes back to the invasion. Not everyone here was happy to have Marines shooting up the place." He called to the driver again. "Isn't that so?"

"Could be, boss."

MacLeish laughed. He was sweaty and happy. Anita tried to relax, failed, contented herself with wishing that the driver would negotiate turns more cautiously. He appeared unfazed when the car missed annihilating a group of half-naked children by inches. Come all this way, Anita thought, to get killed in a car wreck.

There had been no question of her not coming. MacLeish had simply invited her to join him aboard his *Martha Ann* in the West Indies. "We'll start at the bottom," he had told her, "at St. George's, on the south side of Grenada. We'll sail all the way up to the Virgins." She had simply accepted. There was no way in the world she was going to turn down an offer of a Caribbean cruise. A Caribbean cruise, like caviar or an expensive car or a diamond bracelet, was just one of those things she knew she desired before she knew whether or not she liked them. MacLeish was another; there was no way she was going to let him go anywhere without her if she could help it. The relationship had possibilities.

Thus she had passed from Dallas-Fort Worth International to an island airfield that looked a block long and a yard wide. That was at Grenville, at the far end of Grenada from the port of St. George's. Now she was crammed with MacLeish and too much luggage into a taxi making its rattling, un-air-conditioned way along the island's undulating spine.

The car crested a final ridge. Before them, the road twisted past cultivated plots, and Anita found herself looking down an uneven slope at rooftops, streets, the harbor of St. George's itself. The harbor was the inundated crater of an extinct volcano but looked the size of a teacup. Past its mouth, the calm, glittering Caribbean stretched away to the horizon.

"There's *Martha Ann* down there," MacLeish said.

Anita peered. Craft of all descriptions cluttered the harbor. "I have no idea what to look for."

"Thirty-eight footer."

"You're talking to someone who doesn't know a canoe from an aircraft carrier." She pretended to peer again. "Mac, nobody's eyes are that good."

"Trust me."

"I trust you, I just don't think I believe you."

The driver called back over his shoulder, "You want to go on down to your boat, boss?"

"No, no, the hotel."

The hotel directly overlooked the harbor. By the time Anita and MacLeish had cleaned themselves up and changed clothes, it was almost sundown. Burgett sent word that he was waiting in the bar. It was cool there, and crowded with casually well-dressed white people. Burgett was drinking alone at a table, a wiry ageless man with sun-bleached hair and a complexion like a brick's. He greeted MacLeish easily but hesitated before shaking the hand Anita offered. His palm was hard as the bottom of a patent-leather shoe. As they sat down, he said, "Pleasant flight?" and MacLeish shrugged and replied, "Absolutely uneventful. The car ride from Grenville's more interesting."

"Always is."

Anita said, "An old man shook a stick at us."

"What?" Burgett looked at her blankly.

"He shook a stick at us."

Burgett said, "Ah," plainly not understanding, then, to MacLeish—tuning out Anita as casually as though he were changing television channels—"Roger's finished stocking the boat. But he won't be going this time. Says the signs are bad."

"Signs?" MacLeish looked surprised. "Weather?"

"Hell, no. Now who are you going to trust, the weather service or a rummy old bugger? It's just some bloody island nonsense."

"This is short notice."

"Only takes me to handle the yawl rig."

"Still. It won't be quite the same without Roger." To Anita, who had sat quietly annoyed during this exchange, MacLeish said, "Roger's a local character. He's been with me on all my other cruises."

Burgett took a drink and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. His gaze flicked away from MacLeish, did not quite alight on Anita, flicked back to MacLeish. "Be crowded as it is."

"I take up hardly any room at all," Anita said, batting her eyelashes, "and, anyway, I know how to keep out from under men's big feet. I'll stay down in the kitchen while you sail Mac's boat for him. I'll knit some nice doilies for all the deck chairs."

Burgett looked at her in surprise, looked to MacLeish for some kind of support which he evidently did not quite receive, looked down at his drink in confusion.

"Galley," said MacLeish, grinning. "It's not a kitchen, it's a galley. And there're no deck chairs." He trained the grin specifically on Burgett. "I should warn you about her. Sassy thing. Hardly defers to me at all. She needs a warning label. A T-shirt printed with the words, 'Not MacLeish's Usual Sort of Bimbo.'"

Anita said, "That's supposed to be a compliment," and smiled her third-best smile, a thin one. She hated the word *bimbo*.

There was an eruption of laughter from a nearby table. MacLeish and Burgett ignored it, but Anita looked toward the source, two almost identical young white men sitting with two almost identical women of darker complexion. She had never seen any of the four before, but she knew the men—the boys, as she immediately thought of them—to be first-time visitors from the States as certainly as though they had sat across the aisle from her on the plane in. They drank, in a manner of speaking, with both hands. The two women, whom they appeared to be determined to impress, sipped their drinks, or pretended to, smiled whenever their escorts happened to look their way, and took no part in the conversation. The boys—she christened them Ned and Ted—were playing a diagnostic version of Jeopardy.

"An infectious contagious tropical disease," Ned would say, "caused by a spirochete," and rattle his ice, "characterized by ulcerating lesions and bone involvement."

"What is yaws?" Ted would say, looking smug. Both would pause to take a drink. Then Ted would say: "Okay, my turn. Ah. An iron-deficiency anemia in young girls, characterized by a greenish color of the skin."

"Gimme a break—what is chlorosis?" Pause, gulp. "Um. A painful

swelling of the leg at childbirth, caused by inflammation and clotting in the veins."

"What is milk leg?" Pause. Gulp.

Anita wondered whether the boys were actually doctors at all. They were awfully young and altogether too incompletely formed to be full-fledged medical practitioners. Perhaps they were only interns. Perhaps they were med students. But since when did either interns or med students have the time and the wherewithal to hang out in hotel bars on Caribbean islands? Perhaps they were burned-out interns, then, or washed-out med students. Well, she thought, whoever, whatever, they might be, they certainly didn't seem to realize that people weren't impressed with what doctors knew, but with how much money they made.

The harbor of St. George's lay in the deep shadow of the island itself when they went to board the boat. MacLeish had described *Martha Ann* as an ocean cruiser-racer, sturdy enough for the open seas and yet of shallow enough draft, thanks to a centerboard, to work close in to shore—none of which meant a thing to Anita. He claimed to have sailed it, sailed "her," in the local Easter regatta. All Anita knew was that it was required of her that she think *Martha Ann* beautiful, even in that gloom, even at that unreasonable hour, even amid an armada of trim sloops and schooners. Accordingly, she told MacLeish she thought the boat was beautiful. He had been gazing upon it with real and obvious tenderness, but at hearing the object of his regard complimented he put on an expression of fine manly pride of possession.

He took her aboard and below and showed her the sleeping quarters, the tiny galley, the tinier head. The bunk, she noted, was definitely made for two. MacLeish gave her a wink and said, "The mate likes to sleep up on deck." Both the stove and the table were gimbaled. The refrigerator was stocked with delicacies. MacLeish took out a bottle of champagne, poured two glasses, proposed a toast. Champagne breakfast on a yacht, Anita thought. Perfect. She sipped and looked around and said, "People've tried to rent me smaller efficiency apartments."

The sky was lightening, though the sun remained out of sight behind the island, when *Martha Ann* ghosted out of St. George's. The town came right down to the water, and even at that early hour busy people thronged the streets and crowded the shore. The boat passed under the antique guns of the fort guarding the mouth of the harbor and turned parallel with Grenada's black leeward flank. MacLeish helmed, Burgett tended sail, and Anita had nothing to do but stay out of the way and enjoy the smell and the feel of the sea, the taste of salt on her lips, and the rhythmic action of the sharp bow as it sliced the waves. After a time, the sun shyly peeked over the island's spine, and a pale and smoky world

was revealed, of haze-softened peaks, jungle, and fishing communities barely big enough to qualify as villages. By contrast, *Martha Ann's* white hull and sails and polished wood and fittings were luminous. Anita spotted a small craft far out to sea. It looked as fragile as eggshell. Tiny human figures knelt in it; they could have been praying. She pointed and said concernedly, "Are they lost?"

MacLeish shook his head. "You wouldn't believe how far the local fishermen will go out in those little *gommiers* of theirs. You navigate by sight in the West Indies. They've been doing it for centuries. All you have to know is that the islands are somewhere off to your east, so all you have to do to get home is find an island, recognize it, and make your way accordingly."

"What if you don't recognize it?"

"Ha! Then you've got no business being on the water. Sail these islands a time or two, you get to know them at a glance. Hardly any of them is completely out of sight of another island, and no two are exactly alike. That's true whether you're seeing them from a boat or prowling around them on foot. This is the world's real melting pot. You've got your French, Dutch, Spanish, Africans, Caribs, Asians, and every combination thereof. You got your Martians, too. We're the people from Mars." He beckoned to her. "Come steer."

"What? You want me to—"

"Sure. Nothing to it."

He made a space between himself and the wheel, and she moved into it. He showed her where to place her hands, how not to let the boat get away from her. For a time, he rested his hands over hers, transmitting their strength and expertise through her. They were big heavy hands with hairy backs, not, she reflected, your usual investment genius's kind of hand. She suddenly realized that he had relaxed. He still had his arms about her, was still pressed closely and excitingly against her from behind, but she was guiding *Martha Ann*. An inexpressible elation filled her. She glimpsed Burgett forward. He spared her only a quick, unimpressed glance.

Later, when they were approaching Grenada's northern end, MacLeish murmured into her ear, "Better go buckle down for a rough ride," and took the wheel from her. "Oilskins in the locker." He gestured forward. "Going to be rough in the channel up ahead."

The wind abruptly seemed to rebound from Grenada as the island dropped astern. The boat lifted to big rollers, fell, buried itself to the stanchions, and spray came across the deck in sheets. MacLeish bawled to Burgett to reef, and Burgett scrambled to tend jib, mizzen, and mainsail. Even with reduced sail the boat seemed hard-pressed to accommodate so much wind. Anita clung to a stanchion. She could feel the vessel

straining, and as a particularly powerful puff pushed it down like a great invisible hand she half-expected it to fly apart at the joins. Water millraced over the cabin trunk and lee deck, then fell away abruptly; hanging from the stanchion, she stared down into a swirling black-green pit. She did not know whether to be exhilarated or merely frightened out of her wits until MacLeish shot her a glance over his shoulder. He was grinning his grin. She thought, My God, it's *Hemingway*, and decided on exhilaration. MacLeish bellowed his own joy at the sky. "Golf is for pussies!"

The wind finally faltered as they drew abreast of a tiny island, and *Martha Ann* righted itself. Anita let go of the stanchion. She had held on to it throughout the passage. Her fingers were numb, her wrist ached. "That," she said breathlessly, "was quite a ride."

"Hope you liked it," MacLeish said. "Plenty more like it ahead. The West Indies separate the Atlantic and the Caribbean. Winds and waves that started at Africa have to come through the gaps between the islands."

Burgett went below as soon as they had put the anchor down off Carriacou. After an interval, he announced dinner. It was delicious, and Anita said so. Burgett acknowledged the compliment with a nod and a murmur. Then he sat back with a drink in his hand while MacLeish held forth at length about the joys of flogging canvas compared with other hair-raising experiences. He spoke so entertainingly of even the arcana of sail and line that Anita waited until late that night to say, "I don't think Burgett likes me."

"What do you care, as long as I like you?"

They were lying on the oversized bunk in a loose tangle of bare limbs. Old, sweet music played softly, "I Surrender, Dear," "Moonglow," "Stardust." They had made love twice; it was, she reflected during the lull, like sitting on a volcano. Now she had her fingers thrust into the dense mat of MacLeish's chest hair and her face half-buried in his beard. His smell of salt and whiskey was intoxicating.

"I just wonder," Anita said, "if I've done something to irritate him. Or does he think women on boats are bad luck?"

"Haven't you ever met a misogynist before?"

"Oh, all the time."

MacLeish shifted in the darkness and stroked her back. "He's a professional sailor, one of the best I've ever known. I think he's probably only truly happy when he's sailing."

"No wife and kids, no—no life ashore?"

"Sure. No wife and kids, but lots of gambling. He loves to gamble. Horse races, cockfights."

"Ugh. Grown men watching chickens kill one another."

"It's the local action. Probably keeps Burg from drinking himself to death or chasing bimbos." That word again. "My guess is he thinks that sailing, gambling, and women are about equally unpredictable propositions, and a man's asking for trouble if he tries to handle all three."

"How sad. He's shut out half the human race."

"It's his life. Besides." MacLeish grunted happily and pulled her to him. "More for me."

They worked their way northward through the Grenadines the following morning, alternately lazing gracefully along the leeward shores and plunging at full tilt across the channels. Their landfall was the Tobago Cays, in a lagoon sheltered behind a cluster of islets. Anita and MacLeish snorkeled on the reef and explored one of the uninhabited islets, a small, steep-sided spur of overgrown volcanic rock fringed with white sand. They climbed to its summit and admired the view. MacLeish planted his feet wide, put his fists on his hips, made an expansive sound. She believed she knew how he felt. She said, "We could be a million miles from the rest of the world." Somewhere over the horizon was Dallas, where she had a successful small publishing business and a comfortable home and money in the bank and good friends and a life. She realized with a little start that she had not once thought about them since leaving St. George's. "I almost wouldn't mind staying right here forever."

"Almost is the operative word. I come down here once a year, sail, fish, carry on—and experience a rare contentment. From a yacht, the islands are paradise. But for the locals, they're the Third World. And, sooner or later, usually sooner, I get restless. I start wondering how things are shaping up back in the real world. Back in my real life. Making money also fills me with contentment, you know." He reached for her. "Making love, too."

"Beast," she said, resisting only very feebly and briefly.

Their next stop was Kingstown, St. Vincent, where they spent two days shopping and sightseeing and two evenings dining, dancing, and drinking. The first night, they made love almost until dawn in a good hotel room overlooking the harbor. The second, they returned to *Martha Ann* early, and at five o'clock in the morning the boat slipped quietly out to sea again. Approaching the northern end of St. Vincent, MacLeish pointed out the hazy blue heights of the volcano Soufrière and told her that it had erupted in 1902 and killed fifteen hundred people. Then he waved airily with the sandwich she had made for him and added, "But that's nothing. Pelée, on Martinique, blew up the next day and killed thirty thousand." Burgett squatted forward; Anita had made a sandwich for him as well, and he ate it slowly, almost cautiously, while he studied the horizon. That evening, they put the anchor down at Castries, St.

Lucia, but MacLeish said that they would not go ashore, Castries was a raw kind of town, he was too tired for it.

He was not too tired for sex, however. It left Anita feeling less as though she had been sitting on a volcano and more as though she had been riding a mechanical bull. She was quietly grateful when he finally dropped off to sleep. She pulled on her cut-offs and a flannel shirt and left the cabin. Burgett was on deck, smoking a cigarette. He went forward when she came up, and she glared at his retreating back. For God's sake, she thought, it was just a sandwich! She sat aft, admired the harbor lights, listened attentively when music floated out from shore. She felt cut off from everybody and everything and could not decide whether that made her sad or happy. Dallas seemed like a dream. There was everything to be said for being on a boat on a calm warm sea, right?

She had, of course, been filling out her MacLeish checklist all along. She resisted the urge to tally pluses and minuses. She was feeling the first stirrings of apprehension about the totals. MacLeish had looks and energy and money-making acumen, he made every other man she had ever known look like a wax dummy, and better a man who was on too much than one who was never on at all.

But he's too big a dynamo for this little boat, she thought, and gave the wood trim an affectionate slap. We should be on a cruise liner, or a battleship. . . .

In Fort-de-France, Martinique, they dined on *escargots* and *caneton à l'orange* in a small bistro. Midway through the meal, MacLeish received a hand-delivered message from an old acquaintance. "We're invited to visit Monsieur Léopoldie at his country home," he said. "I handle business for him on the Third Coast. He's Caribbean planter aristocracy, a *béké*—a white descendant of French colonists."

A hired car took them inland, following a road that mounted into a dark, precipitous countryside. The Léopoldie house was huge. It sat upon a terrace of pale brick, itself set on a natural rise; Anita felt that she could have looked not only straight down into Fort-de-France but clear across the Caribbean as well, to Central America and beyond to the Pacific. A mulatto servant greeted them at the door and led them from the jalousied porch to a high-ceilinged room. There were shelves of books, silver cups, a crucifix mounted on the wall. The master of the house was a long, distinguishedly gray man in his sixties. He bounded up from his cane chair and shook MacLeish's hand warmly. "How good to see you again!" He had a rich accent. He peered at Anita as though he had first-refusal rights, and she gave him her second-best smile.

They moved to a verandah on another side of the house. A different mulatto served rum punch, and MacLeish and the planter bent their heads together and conversed about boats, horses, and money while

Anita sat quietly and opened her mouth only to take a sip of her drink. Then MacLeish suddenly stopped talking and turned his face toward the open windows. Anita listened. There was a sound of drumming, faint, as if coming from a great distance, yet insistent. MacLeish, after listening for a moment, said, "The natives are restless tonight," and smiled at his own wit.

"They are restless most nights," said Monsieur Léopoldie. Anita looked questioningly at him. His mouth twisted in a grimace. "*Quimbois*."

She shook her head uncomprehendingly and started to apologize for her imperfect French, but MacLeish snapped, "*Quimbois*—local black magic, right?"

Léopoldie nodded.

"Only the label changes," MacLeish said.

Léopoldie said it again, "*Quimbois*," made a but-of-course gesture, went on, "*obeah, vodou*, yes, only the label."

"Go anywhere in the Caribbean," MacLeish told Anita, "even Cuba, and you find essentially the same pack of soothsayers and spellcasters praying to the same pack of transplanted African gods and *Petra loas*."

"Erzulie, Ogoun, Legba, Damballa," Léopoldie intoned, "all came to these islands aboard the slave ships. And they say other spirits were already here, old Carib spirits—waiting. Nothing has ever been able to drive them out."

Anita said, "Then they must fill a legitimate need," and drank her rum punch.

The old planter scowled. "Its practitioners say it is a legitimate religion. If there is a central tenet, it is that there are two worlds, the world of ghosts and our world, the world of the living. The spirits of the dead are able to visit the world of the living, to bless them or curse them. The wizards claim the power to put the living in touch with the dead, by calling upon Legba to open the door between worlds. If you want the dead to bless you and not curse you, it is essential, of course, that you know their desires."

"Just another damn priesthood," said MacLeish. "World'd be a better place if every clergyman in it was at the bottom of the Cayman Trench."

Léopoldie gave him a really-now look, and Anita tried to inject a note of levity by asking, "Is that on top of all the politicians you want to consign there?"

MacLeish ignored the question and said, "Every time I come sail these islands, I hear people beating on those old drums, and hear about the world of spirits. In the States we have all these persistent stories everyone has heard, thinks *could* be true, wants to believe. Flying saucers, Bigfoot. John F. Kennedy and Elvis Presley faked their own deaths. Planes and ships are swallowed up in the Bermuda triangle. Alligators

infest the sewers of New York City Urban myths. Here I guess you'd call them island legends."

"I would call them arrant nonsense," Léopoldie said, perfectly earnestly, "but it is true, they persist. The *loas* will not go away. I have lived in these islands all my life and heard all of the stories. How, when a man died suddenly, it was because someone had sprinkled chicken blood on his doorstep. How someone took revenge on his enemy by turning him into a *zombi*. How the countryside was terrorized by the *loup-garou*, or, if it was not the *loup-garou*, the *soucouyant*, then, or the *zobop*. How a ball of fire ran along the ground like a thing alive and chased somebody to his doom. Ignorance and imagination are a terrible combination."

MacLeish smirked over the rim of his glass at Anita. She said, "I think for most people belief in something is better than belief in nothing. Any explanation is better than no explanation at all."

MacLeish's smirk broadened into the familiar grin. To Léopoldie he said, "She's been to college."

The planter, however, was taking her seriously. "Then why not the *real* explanation?" he said. "We have schools, science, medicine. The Holy Church has been here for almost five hundred years. Yet the people still buy remedies from witch doctors and believe their superstitious fables. Papa Bois is still master of the forests. Hunters still look over their shoulders in fear of him."

"Perhaps," said Anita, "this Papa Bois is comprehensible to them in a way science can never be."

"The problem," Monsieur Léopoldie said, touching a fingertip to his temple, "is that education does not penetrate blacks' thick skulls. And the mulattoes are even worse. They have one foot on the church steps and one foot in the magic circle. You can always depend on the blacks to be stupid and childish, but you can never be sure what mulattoes will do."

Anita felt her facial expression petrify. She had never in her adult life been so sheltered or deluded as to imagine that racism was not a fact of life in the United States. One of her most vivid childhood memories was of the expression of pride on a real estate agent's face as he assured her parents, "This is a real good neighborhood, folks, there're no niggers here." She had had no idea what niggers might be, but the weight of loathing the word bore impressed her. Afterward, in the car, when she asked for an explanation, her mother shushed her vehemently. Still later, when someone told her what niggers were, she was disappointed. She had expected monsters. Even so, the United States was big—one might see videotape of police officers beating a handcuffed black man on the evening news, or of pathetic skinheads biting themselves in an excess

of racist exasperation, but one could live in a nice place, with neighbors who were as nice as oneself and very much like oneself for all that their skin color was different, and come to believe that racists lived only in some other, less-nice place.

Martinique was small. . . .

She made herself relax her grip on her glass. She looked from Léopoldie's face to MacLeish's. He calmly drank his punch. Then he sat forward in his chair, and Anita knew that he was about to swing the conversation around to some topic that suited him.

Later, as they prepared for bed in the planter's guest quarters, she gave MacLeish a bitter look over her shoulder. "The man's rabid," she said. "He fairly foamed at the mouth when he got off on stupid blacks and treacherous mulattoes." MacLeish only grunted noncommittally, and she heard her own voice sharpen. "Or weren't you paying attention?"

"What should I have done? Politely told him that that kind of talk upsets my lady friend? These islands are his home, you're a guest in his house. He's a bigot, okay, but he's sitting on his own porch, drinking his own liquor. He's perfectly within his rights if he wants to say terrible things about people of color—or about women, Old Glory, or the Dallas Cowboys, for that matter."

"And I'd've been perfectly within my rights if I'd got up and walked out."

"Where'd you have walked out *to*?" He flashed the grin. She hated him in that moment. She wanted to put her fist right in the middle of his teeth. "Can't just hail a cab here and say, Drop me off in front of Dallas."

"Go to hell."

The grin remained in place, but his face hardened around it. She backed off. She was too tired, the rum punch was catching up with her. She pressed her hand lightly against his chest, patted him once or twice, started to move away. He slipped his arm around her and pulled her close. He was still grinning, and she noticed now that he was in a semi-aroused state. She said, "I'm not in the mood," and tried to pull away again. He proposed to get her into the mood. She said, "I'm sorry, Mac." He tried to get her on her knees in front of him and told her she knew how to show him just how sorry she was. She had a vision of herself careering through the halls of Monsieur Léopoldie's mansion, hair streaming, eyes wild, mouth full of MacLeish's blood and meat, the whole household in an uproar. *That* sorry, she thought, as she wrenched away from him and retreated to the bathroom.

She had to come out eventually. He's my goddamn ride home, she reflected angrily. She made a vaguely conciliatory sound as she crept into bed, and he answered with a grunt. They slept with their backs to each other, not touching. She got through breakfast with their host on

the strength of her second-best smile, but she was dismayed when she realized that they were to be Monsieur Léopoldie's guests throughout the day. The planter led them on a grand tour of his estate and extolled the beauty of the countryside. A full day in the crossfire of his and MacLeish's bonhomie left her feeling battered; by that evening, she was down to third-best smile. MacLeish evidently did not notice, let alone mind, that she had barely said a word to him or anyone else all day.

The next morning, they sailed from Fort-de-France. Aboard *Martha Ann*, only Burgett was happy. Throughout an interminable predawn farewell breakfast with Monsieur Léopoldie, Anita had spoken only when addressed, which was rarely. MacLeish must have noticed at last that she was out of sorts about something. Up the coast, he opened conversation by pointing out the killer volcano, unrepentant Montagne Pelée; it looked thoroughly pleasant, a green mountain with clouds snagged on its peak. Unimpressed, Anita adjusted her sunglasses, tilted her head back, closed her eyes. The Caribbean sun was hot and brilliant.

"Try," she heard him say, "please just try not to be so intolerant of my tolerance of someone else's intolerance. I do business with the man. When you do business with people, you don't play political-correctness cop with them. You nod, say uh-huh, and get them to sign where you want."

She opened her eyes and glared up at him. "You do business with *me*." She gestured furiously, all-encompassingly with her arms. "Was all this just your way of getting me to sign where you wanted?"

"Oh, Christ, of course not." He angrily turned his back on her. She closed her eyes again.

So much for possibilities, she thought.

The channel crossing north of Martinique was rougher than anything she had previously experienced aboard *Martha Ann*. The sea steepened until the boat clung to the side of a moving cliff of water. Anita had both hands around her favorite stanchion, but the deck kept dropping out from under her, then coming back up in a hurry. Something banged her sharply on the hip one time, and she had the breath knocked out of her the next. A smother of white water broke over the lee rail, sending spray across the deck with stinging force. It went up her nose, down her throat, blinded her, sucked at her clothes as it fell away. She lost one shoe and almost lost her grip on the stanchion. When her vision cleared, she glimpsed MacLeish's face; he looked supremely happy and confident as he bawled orders that Burgett could not possibly have heard above the roar of the wind.

She could not say how long the crossing lasted. They were suddenly, finally, in the lee of the next island. MacLeish sagged over the wheel, spent and happy. Burgett was looking about tiredly and shaking his

head. *Martha Ann*'s canvas drooped in tatters. The jib hung crazily. After a minute or so, MacLeish said, in a croaking voice, "Everybody all right?"

Burgett stumbled aft. "Never saw it so rough as just now."

MacLeish grunted agreement. "Talk about survival conditions." He surveyed the mess of *Martha Ann*'s rigging, then looked ahead, where a landmass loomed over the cracked jib. Anita waited. Burgett kept looking around; he seemed puzzled. MacLeish continued to stare ahead. Nothing moved in his face. His mouth was open.

"Here, Mac," said Burgett, "this is odd. . . ."

"Mac?" said Anita.

MacLeish blinked. His nostrils twitched. He closed his mouth, swallowed. His head began to turn slowly toward the direction of their voices while his eyes tried to stay fixed on the island.

"Mac, what's the matter?"

He blinked again. His eyes met hers briefly. His jaw muscles worked, and from someplace deep inside him came a sound, "Nothing."

Burgett could not be still. He kept moving from one side of the boat to the other. "What the hell is this?"

To MacLeish, Anita said, as lightly as she could, "Don't give me that. You look—"

"*Nothing!*" MacLeish struck the cockpit trim with the side of his fist. Behind him, Burgett murmured, "It can't be."

"What're you two *talking* about? Tell me!"

"Go below, Anita! Go see how things are below!"

"Don't yell at me like I'm a deckhand!"

"Anita! *Do it!*"

She did it. Water squished underfoot; *Martha Ann* had not been swamped but had been soaked. The gimbaled stove was twisted on its mounts. Lockers had dumped their contents. On her way back topside, she found Burgett at the radio set. He did not look at her as she passed. He had on the earphones, and he plainly was not enjoying whatever he was hearing.

"It's wet and untidy below," Anita told MacLeish, "but as far as I can tell we aren't sinking or anything. Now if you'd kindly just tell me what's wrong—"

MacLeish sucked in a great breath. "Well, I don't know what's wrong."

"But something *is* wrong, is it not? God, I feel like I'm in a Monty Python routine all of a sudden."

"We're *lost*, okay?"

"How can we be lost?" He did not answer and went on looking at the island. She looked at it, too. It was an island like every other island. She said, "What happened to navigating by sight, island to island, the way you—"

Burgett came up. He was even unhappier than before.

"Well?" MacLeish demanded.

"It's bloody panic. Lots of people on the air, calling for directions. I can't get anything from Montserrat, but I'm picking up traffic from Grenada! Nobody's making sense."

MacLeish chewed his lower lip. He shushed Anita when she started to speak and gestured vehemently toward the island ahead. "That should be Dominica," he said, "or it could even be Guadeloupe or Marie-Galante if we were way, *way* off course. But it's none of them! Don't you recognize that harbor? We sailed out of it a few days ago."

"I don't underst—"

MacLeish jabbed the air with his finger. "There's the old fortress, remember the old fortress? It's St. George's! We're off the south coast of Grenada! We're off—"

"What?"

"Goddammit! St. George's! Grenada!"

"I don't understand."

MacLeish laughed harshly, mirthlessly. "You think *I* understand?"

"We're back where we started?"

"A mirage," Burgett said.

"How can it be a mirage?" said MacLeish.

"How can we be back where we started?" said Burgett.

No one spoke for a time. The boat drifted. Then MacLeish said, "The compass needle still points north. The wind and waves are right." Something like a hopeful tone crept into his voice. "Presumably, the sun still rises and sets."

"We can't just sit out here on the water forever."

"She's right," Burgett said. "The boat's banged up. We have to go somewhere."

MacLeish straightened himself behind the wheel. "Okay, okay. Okay. We'll go ashore at—here. We'll find out what's going on, and we'll fix the boat."

Burgett hesitated, nodded, moved forward. They got some sail up, and *Martha Ann* entered the harbor of St. George's, Grenada. A small crowd had collected on the marina. Anita saw people gesticulating and heard voices raised in fierce debate. Two sailorly old men were arguing indiscriminately with each other and onlookers. When *Martha Ann* was tied up, MacLeish, grim-faced, unobtrusively produced two revolvers from somewhere and gave one to Burgett, who barely glanced at it before thrusting it into his trousers pocket.

"Get the jib repaired as soon as you can," MacLeish told him. "We may want to clear out of here in a big hurry. I'll see what I can find out at Government House. Somebody there'll know what this is all about."

With Anita in tow, he brushed past the dispute on the marina at a brisk walk. The old men were arguing in their island English, speaking so rapidly that she could barely understand them. Whatever had started it, the argument had come down at last to who was crazy and who was not. MacLeish hailed a taxi, and after telling the driver to go to Government House, he said, "Anita, I think you should go wait at the hotel. Get a room if you can. We may—"

She shook her head. "If it's all the same to you—"

"We may be here for a little while, and you'll be safer at the hotel."

"Safer than at Government House?" She looked out the window. Away from the marina, St. Georgians went unconcernedly about their business. "Safe from what? I'll *feel* safer if I stick close."

She thought he would argue with her, but he merely shrugged.

"Mac?"

"Mmm?"

"What do you think is going on here?"

He examined the backs of his hands, turned the palms up, tried to shape something in the air between them. Then he let them fall and said, "Beats the hell out of me."

They said no more until the car had made its way along the road around the harbor and entered the shadow of Government House's gingerbread façade. MacLeish told the driver to wait. They hurried inside and found a small, mostly Caucasian crowd there. A pink-faced man at the head of the room was telling everybody to stay calm, the situation was well in hand, please go home. "And what situation would that *be*?" someone demanded in a booming American voice.

The Government House man looked harried, but his very British voice resonated in the room. "We are assessing the situation. As soon as we—"

"I thought you had it well in hand, or is this some other goddamn situation you're talking about?" and with a gesture of disgust the speaker abruptly turned out of the crowd. He almost collided with Anita. He was a thickset balding man with a pair of dark sunglasses pushed up on his forehead. He peered for a moment, then said past Anita to MacLeish, "Don't waste your time here. Idiot doesn't even know which situation he's talking about. MacLeish, isn't it?"

MacLeish, obviously at a disadvantage, only nodded.

"Name's Mitchell. I flew you in last week."

"Ah? Oh."

Anita thought, Only last week. . . ?

"They don't know anything here," Mitchell said. "Only thing they can say is, 'All communication with the mainland's cut off, please go away.' Hell, all communication with most of the other islands is cut off!" As if unconvinced that he was already speaking loudly enough to be heard by

everyone in the room, he raised his voice. "Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago, Dominica, the Leewards—it's like they all just ceased to be!"

"All I know," said a man in full tourist plumage, "is I have to be in New Orleans tomorrow morning!"

"Maybe New Orleans has ceased to be, too," said someone behind him.

"Maybe it's World War Three," said someone else, and at least two other people moaned.

"Who against who?" snarled Mitchell.

A fiftyish woman dug something out of her purse and advanced tentatively. She held up a pocket-sized New Testament. She said, "In Revelations, it says," and no more, because Mitchell said, "Give me a goddamn break, people," and swatted the little book out of her hand. It flew past Anita's head like a mutant bird.

"Really, now, Mr. Mitchell," the pink-faced man began, "Until we know precisely—"

Mitchell ignored him and said to MacLeish, "Walk down with me, I need a drink."

Anita saw MacLeish give the man a wary look. "We, uh, have a car waiting outs—"

"Good, then you can give me a ride down. I really need that drink. This thing, event, phenomenon—whatever it is, I can't think about it sober any more. I made my regular hop in yesterday, and everything was normal. I made the hop out of Grenville this morning, heading up-island, and'd just cleared Martinique when, suddenly, what the hell, I'm approaching Grenada again—from the southeast!"

"I," said MacLeish, "we," and Anita finished for him, "Were on a boat, the same thing happened to us on a boat."

"Everything was normal," said MacLeish, "except—"

Mitchell nodded, turned his palms up, laughed nervously. "Yeah. Except. When I saw St. George's up ahead, I turned around and flew down-island a bit and wound up over Martinique again. I got a little crazy then, and who can blame me? I flew west and came up on Martinique from the east. Look, some of these folks were on my plane today." Several people in the crowd nodded. "So if I'm crazy, they're crazy, too. And if they're crazy, then everybody on this whole goddamn island's crazy. This is happening to everybody."

The nodding immediately stopped. It struck Anita that no one wanted to agree that this was happening at all.

"The whole time," Mitchell went on, "I was picking up just the weirdest crap you ever heard on the radio. Some guy on a cruiser was crying into the mike about sailing east from St. Vincent for Barbados but coming up instead on St. Vincent from the west. Picked up another boat, this guy says the skipper's jumped overboard, there's all this screaming in

the background—"He looked imploringly at MacLeish. "I could use that drink now."

"Mr. Mitchell," the pink-faced man called out behind them, "I can't have you alarming citizens with improbable tales and irresponsible suppositions."

"Hey, pal," Mitchell replied over his shoulder, "I think the appropriate response to what you can't have is, 'Sod off, you fatuous git!'" He flashed a grin at Anita and said, "That's Brit for, 'Fuck you, asshole,'" and she thought, Oh, great, another MacLeish.

They wedged themselves into the rear of the car, with Anita in the middle. Mitchell regarded them intently. His jowls and forehead glittered with perspiration, and his breathing was harsh. He gave the nervous laugh again and said, "I tell you I need that drink. You need one, too, believe me. Everybody on the island's gonna need a drink when they hear about it."

Pedestrian traffic increased as they descended the hill from which Government House overlooked the town, until their progress became a succession of fitful starts. "Man," said the exasperated driver, "you think it was festival the way people walk in front of you."

Is anything ever so terrible, Anita asked herself, that a shower can't make it at least a little better?

Mitchell had quit their company immediately upon arriving at the hotel with the declared intention of heading straight for his favorite bar and getting drunk in an awful hurry. She could imagine him sitting at a corner table, using his hands to recreate or invent an aerial dogfight for the edification of equally drunken companions—Ned and Ted, perhaps. Now who were Ned and Ted? She could not remember immediately.

Anita sat at the vanity table, combing out her hair. She had expected to want to fall asleep as soon as she showered; instead, she was wide awake, wired, in fact, waiting for some sense of strangeness to penetrate. She had watched the sun go down over the Caribbean and seen the first stars come out. What was it MacLeish had said on the boat? The compass needle still points north, the wind and waves are right, the sun still rises and sets. How, then, could anything possibly be wrong? How could they be so *impossibly* wrong. . . ? While I'm sitting here blow-drying my hair the world can't have changed somehow so that wherever you set out from, in whatever direction, you end up back at your starting point. It's too, I don't know, zen or something.

She tried to force acceptance on herself by thinking about Dallas. I have a real life, I own my own business, I make money, I used to be married to a man named Roger, I keep fit, I . . .

She did not miss it and could not mourn it because she did not believe

that it was actually threatened. Surely this was all a mistake, a hoax, an elaborate practical joke. . . .

While I'm putting on my panties, bra, skirt, blouse, while I attend to normal, routine matters like lipstick, the world can be only the world, the world can only be the world.

MacLeish came out of the bathroom. He sat down on the end of the bed opposite her and said, "Here's what we'll do." He looked and sounded like himself again. He had been uncharacteristically quiet ever since *Martha Ann* put in. He had seemed shrunken next to Mitchell. "We're going to get out of here. As soon as the boat's fixed, we'll press on."

She looked at him in surprise. "Press on to where?"

"Venezuela, maybe the A-B-Cs. Someplace."

"I think we're better off to wait and see what happens next. Maybe this thing isn't permanent. Maybe they'll fly in help from the, you know, the outside."

MacLeish frowned. "Maybe there isn't any outside. Maybe the rest of the world doesn't exist any more. Maybe it's all been, I don't know, segmented, partitioned. Maybe there're all these little strips as long and wide as the Windwards, and everybody's going around and around in them and getting nowhere. Or maybe the islands from Grenada to Martinique are the only part that's been cut off. Maybe the gap closed, maybe, back in the world, now you can go directly from Tobago to Dominica. This is all so insane. All I know is, if there's a way out, I intend to find it."

"That man Mitchell couldn't find it, and he had an airplane."

"Maybe it takes a more delicate touch."

She had a vision of the three of them, MacLeish, Burgett, herself, on *Martha Ann*. In the vision, she was a blurry object tucked out of the men's way, and the men were absolutely content, so long as one had his sails to tend and the other could hold the wheel and grin like Ernest goddamn Hemingway, to sail forever and never touch land. She picked at a particle of lint on her robe. "This is too weird for me to have to deal with and worry about drowning at the same time."

"What?"

"If you press on, as you call it, I don't think I'll go with you. I can't tell you what I make of all this, because I can't make anything of it yet. I haven't started believing anything's really wrong, except that everybody else is very upset. I guess I will be, too, if it lasts long enough. For now, I'm just going to play it safe."

"Safe?" MacLeish's frown intensified. "Things are going to get bad in a hurry if this thing doesn't change back. Fragile island economies will be reeling, governments will collapse."

It came to her unbidden, from what felt like a long time before. "They

grow everything good to eat here," she said, "orange, banana, pimento, cocoa for chocolate." And smell that good smell. "I've got my credit cards and some cash."

"The only thing cash'll be good for is tinder. Plastic won't even be that useful." MacLeish's frown evolved at last into a glower of exasperation. "These islands, you know, they were infested with cannibals once upon a time. They could be again."

"I'm a big girl, Mac. And like the lady says, a woman today's like an aerialist between trapezes. I'll catch hold of something."

"Goddammit, Anita, down here, you're reduced to just about one marketable skill I can think of."

She had finished dressing. She tucked her handbag under her arm. "One day soon," she said evenly, "I expect to think back on how I let you touch me, and shudder with horror," and tossed her room key onto the bed as she walked out.

The hotel bar was full of people and conversation. Everyone was drinking too much and talking too loudly, and their voices all had the same hysterical edge. Anita ordered a drink. A nervous young man nearby was saying to a glum young woman, "If the plane heads one direction from Grenada only to come back to Grenada from the opposite direction, is it still Grenada? I mean, is this where we were this morning? Is it really the same place?" The young woman rolled her eyes and told him to shut the hell up and get her another drink. The young man ordered another drink for her but did not shut up. "If the plane takes off again and I stay here, will I greet myself stepping off the plane when it gets back?" He noticed Anita and said to her, "Everybody here's got a pet explanation for the phenomenon. Speculation's running strongly in favor of devil's triangles and mischievous extraterrestrials. Me, I think maybe time-space has swallowed its own tail. Any ideas on the subject?"

The bartender set a drink before her. Anita touched the glass with her finger and thumb and watched light sparkle on ice. She gave the young man her best smile. "An old man shook a stick," she said. ●

NEXT ISSUE

Nebula and World Fantasy Award-winner **Kim Stanley Robinson**, one of the most respected and popular science fiction writers alive, returns to these pages next month with our February cover story, a major new novella that takes us to the setting of his widely acclaimed novel *Red Mars* (which no less an authority than Arthur C. Clarke endorsed as the best novel about Mars ever written) for a compelling, evocative, and lyrical look at "A Martian Childhood."

(Continued on page 167)

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LEGACIES

Tom Purdom

To some extent, "Legacies" is based on the author's own experience as a Navy brat. The story was also inspired by conversations with others who were military children, memoirs, biographies, and studies that cover much of the twentieth century and some other historical periods. While a number of fine works have recently been published on the subject, Mr. Purdom believes the best treatment of a military childhood is still *The Great Santini*.

art: Alan M. Clark



Deni Wei-Kolin was asleep in the childcare center at Hammar skjold Station when the fifteen assault vehicles began their kamikaze run into Rinaswandi Base. Rinaswandi was in the asteroid belt, about a third of the way around the sun from the Earth-Moon system, so it would be a good twenty-five minutes before a signal carrying news of the attack reached Hammar skjold and the other man-made satellites that orbited Earth and Luna. The signal would actually reach Hammar skjold a full second later than it reached some of the other habitats, in fact. Hammar skjold was the off-Earth military headquarters of the UN Secretariat and it had been placed in a lunar orbit, for the kind of accidental political reasons that usually decide such matters. Given the positions of the Earth and the Moon at the time the signal started its journey, the message from Rinaswandi actually had to zap past Earth before a big antenna sucked it into Hammar skjold's electronic systems.

Deni's mother, Gunnery Sergeant Wei, got the news a bit earlier than most of the fifteen billion people who currently inhabited the solar system. The military personnel stationed in Rinaswandi Base had been under siege for seventeen days when the attack began. For twelve hours out of every twenty-four, Deni's mother had been plugged into the Rinaswandi defense system, ready to respond the moment the alert signal pinged into her ear and the injector built into her combat suit shot a personalized dose of stimulant/tranquilizer into her thigh.

All around Sergeant Wei people were beginning to stir. There were twenty of them crammed into the command module—a place that was only supposed to provide working space for six—and you couldn't shift your weight without disturbing someone. Half of them were merely observers—support people and administrative wallahs. Gunnery Sergeant Wei could hear little whispers and murmurs as they caught glimpses of the symbols moving across the screens in front of the combat specialists.

The stimulant/tranquilizer started spreading its chemical blessings through Sergeant Wei's nervous system. The long, carefully groomed fingers of her left hand slipped into position just below the key pad she would use to direct the missiles, guns, and electronic devices under her control.

The acting commander of Rinaswandi Base, Logistics Captain Tai, was a slender young man who tended to relate to his subordinates with a lot of handclapping and mock-enthusiastic banter. Even now, when the arrows and icons on his screens represented real vehicles armed with real ammunition, the voice in Sergeant Wei's earphones sounded like it was sending some kind of sports team into a tournament.

"Alllll right, people. As you can see, ladies and gentlemen, they're all bunched up on one side of our happy little home, in Quadrants III and IV. Apparently they're hoping they can overwhelm whatever we've got on that side. Gunner Three—take the eight targets on the left in your quadrant. Gunner Four—take everything in your quadrant plus the four on the right in Quadrant Three. Gunner One, Gunner Two—be prepared

to switch your attentions to the other two quadrants. But I would appreciate it—to say the least—if you would keep an eye out for anybody trying to slip in on your side while we're looking the other way. Let's not assume they're as dumb as we think they are."

In the childcare center, twenty-five light-minutes away, Sergeant Wei's son was sleeping with his right arm draped across the stuffed animal he had been given when he was two—a hippopotamus, about half as long as he was tall, that Deni had named Ibar. Two of the children sleeping near him had parents on Rinaswandi. Six had parents on the four hydrogen-fusion torch ships that had accelerated away from Hammar skjold Station, crammed with troops and equipment, two days after Rinaswandi had come under siege.

Every day all the children in the childcare center stretched out on the big shaggy rug in the playroom and listened to a briefing. Every day, the younger ones focused their best I'm-a-good-student stares on an orbital diagram that showed the current positions of Hammar skjold Station, Rinaswandi, the four torch ships, and a place in the asteroid belt called Akara City. They all knew, as well as their young minds could grasp it, that Akara City had been ruled for five decades by a strong-willed mayor who had turned it into a bustling commercial center in which half a million people took full advantage of the raw materials available in the asteroid belt. The mayor had died, her successor had been caught in a financial scandal, and the turmoil had somehow led to a classic breakdown of social order—a breakdown that had been manipulated by an obscure married couple who had emigrated to Akara City after they had been chased out of a Zen-Random communal colony. In the last six months, according to the teachers who gave the briefing, Mr. and Mrs. Chen had done some "very bad things." One of the bad things they had done had been killing people—about three hundred, according to the most believable news reports. They had also engaged in approximately two thousand involuntary personality modifications—but that was a crime young children sometimes had trouble understanding.

Six weeks ago, a hundred troops could have torched into Rinaswandi Base, picked up the weapons and fighting vehicles stockpiled in its vaults, and deposed Mr. and Mrs. Chen in a few hours. As usual, however, the international politicians had dithered about "sovereignty" and the exact border that defined the line between "internal" and "external" affairs. And while they dithered, Mr. and Mrs. Chen had managed to establish communications with an officer at Rinaswandi who had been greedier than his psychological profiles had indicated. The equipment stockpiled in Rinaswandi had become part of the Chens' arsenal and the personnel stationed in Rinaswandi had crammed themselves into their command module and started watching their screens.

The teachers at the childcare center would never have told their charges the politicians had "dithered," of course. They were officers in the Fourth International Brigade. Proper military people never say bitter things about politicians during official, approved briefings.

Nobody on Hammarskjold told Deni they felt sorry for him, either. That was another thing military people didn't do. If anyone *had* given Deni a pat and a sympathetic word, however, he would have thanked them very politely and even looked a little thoughtful. For a moment, in fact, he would have thought he really did feel sad.

Deni's mother had been stationed on Rinaswandi for two months before the siege had broken out. For most of the second month, his father, Assault Sergeant Kolin, had been trying to convince him a boy his age shouldn't sleep with a stuffed hippopotamus. It hadn't been as bad as the time his father had made him stop wetting the bed. That time Deni had been forced to endure almost six weeks of hand slappings, sarcastic baby talk, and "confinement to quarters" in a sopping bed.

Deni was seven years old. For four of those years—over half his lifetime—one of his parents had been away on some kind of military assignment. When his mother was gone, he lived with an easy-going, enjoy-it-while-you-can father whose basic indolence was punctuated by periods in which Assault Sergeant Kolin became obsessed by the belief his son needed "discipline." When his father was away, Deni's days were dominated by a goal-oriented mother who believed every moment of a child's life should be as productive as she could make it. When they were both home, he frequently found himself pressing against a wall, knees doubled against his chest, while they engaged in "domestic disputes" that sometimes ended in bruised faces and even broken bones.

Deni's day to day life in the childcare center had its flaws. He still had to sit through the daily message Sergeant Wei videoed from Rinaswandi, in spite of the siege. He still had to send his mother a return message in which he assured her he was practicing his flute two hours and fifteen minutes every day—the minimum a boy as talented as her son should practice, in Sergeant Wei's opinion. He still had to spend three hours a week talking to an officer named Medical Captain Min, who kept pestering him with questions about the way he felt about different things. All in all, however, the last fifteen days of Deni's life had been a lot pleasanter than most of the other two week periods he could remember. Somewhere in the center of his personality, sleeping with his hippopotamus, there was a little boy who would have been quite happy if neither of his parents ever came home again.

And that, of course, was the problem.

Medical Captain Dorothy Min was a tall young woman with a round, pleasant face and a manner that correlated with her appearance. Deni Wei-Kolin might have liked her very much, in fact, if she had been a teacher or a childcare specialist. At 23:07 Hammarskjold time—forty-two minutes after the Rinaswandi defense system had decided it was under attack—Captain Min was sitting in front of the communications screen in her personal quarters. She was revising a statement in which she requested, for the fourth time, that she be allowed to communicate

with Deni's parents. She was staring at a paragraph in which she explained—once again—the major reason she wanted to apply a procedure that she and her colleagues usually referred to as an "esem."

I can only repeat what I've already said before, the paragraph under consideration read. The death of one of Deni's parents—especially in combat—could result in permanent, lifelong psychological damage if we do not apply the appropriate preventive measure before that happens. Fantasies about his parents' deaths have become an important component of Deni's emotional structure. The death of one of his parents could trigger guilt reactions no seven-year-old personality can possibly handle. It has now been fourteen days since I originally asked for permission to discuss this matter with Gunnery Sergeant Wei and Assault Sergeant Kolin. If either of his parents is killed in combat before we can provide him with the benefits of at least one session with an ego-strengthening emotional modification procedure, the prognosis for Deni's future emotional development is about as hopeless as it can get.

Half the space on Captain Min's screen was cluttered with paragraphs and charts she had included in the three memos she had already addressed to the commander of the Akara Assault Force. She should keep her memo short, her contact on the torch ships had told her, but she shouldn't assume General Lundstrom had read her previous communications. This time, her contact had assured her, the message would bypass the general's over-protective staff.

She touched the screen with her finger and drew an X over the now in. It has now been fourteen days. The now added a little emphasis, in her opinion, but her contact had made it clear every word counted.

A light glowed over a loudspeaker. "Captain Dorothy Min has a call from Dr. Bedakar Barian," the communications system murmured. "Emergency Priority."

Captain Min tapped the accept button on her keyboard. A plump, bearded face replaced the text on her screen.

"There's a report on Trans-Solar, Dorothy—an attack on Rinaswandi. Have you seen it yet?"

Captain Min grabbed her stylus and scratched a command on the notebook lying beside her right hand. Dr. Barian's face receded to the upper left quarter of her communications screen. A printed news bulletin started scrolling across the right half.

"I told my system to monitor the Akara crisis and alert me if it picked up any major developments," Dr. Barian said. "Trans-Solar may not be as trustworthy as the stuff you people get through channels, but it looks like it's a lot faster."

Captain Min had been wearing her working uniform while she dictated. Now her hands reached down and automatically tightened the belt on her tunic. One of the purposes of military training, her father had always claimed, was the development of a military alter-ego—a limited personality that could take control of your responses whenever you were

confronted with realities that would have overwhelmed any normal human. The surge of emotion reached a danger point, a circuit kicked in, and the hard, clear responses of the professional officer or NCO replaced the messy turbulence of the human being cringing inside the uniform.

There were no pictures yet. All Trans-Solar had was a few messages from Rinaswandi and a statement from Mr. and Mrs. Chen claiming that the "center of international militarism" on Rinaswandi had been "effectively terminated."

"That's crazy," Captain Min said. "Even for them it's crazy."

"It's what they've been telling us they were going to do for the last seventeen days."

"It's still crazy. They could have pulled a quarter of our assault force away from the attack on Akara City just by maintaining a low-level threat against Rinaswandi. Now they don't even have the threat."

"Apparently their assessment of the situation doesn't conform to standard military logic."

Dr. Barian lived in Nous Avon, the smallest of the Five Cities that housed most of the human beings who inhabited the space between Earth and Luna. Captain Min had never met him in person but his face had dominated her communication screens—and her dreams—from the day he had become her mentor for her training in family therapy. She was especially familiar with the look he got on his face when he was contemplating the follies of people who wore uniforms.

Dr. Barian was, in her opinion, one of the best teachers she had ever worked with. The lectures, reading materials and learning programs he had chosen for her had always been first-rate. His criticisms of her work had almost always made sense. He just happened to believe the human brain turned into sludge the moment you put a blue hat on top of it.

"You'd better call the childcare center," Dr. Barian said. "Right away. Tell them you want Deni kept away from any contact that may give him the news—video, other children. Make it clear you're the one who's going to tell him—no one else."

He lowered his head, as if he were examining some notes, then looked up again. "Then I think it's time you and I stopped playing games, young woman. We're both well aware that everything you've been saying in all your memos only proves that Deni should have been put through the complete modification procedure the day his father went riding off to war. You're supposed to be a therapist, Dorothy—a healer. The people who wrote the laws can't make your decisions for you."

Captain Min stared at him. This was the first time Dr. Barian had made it absolutely clear he thought she should have applied the esem without waiting for the parents' consent. He had been dropping hints every since the Akara crisis had started developing, but he had never put it quite so bluntly.

"We still don't even know Sergeant Wei is dead, Dr. Barian. Don't you think we should verify that before we start asking ourselves if we've got a right to start ignoring the law?"

"From what they're saying, it sounds like most of the control module has been blown up. If she isn't dead, then we've had a scare that should convince you we're risking that child's welfare—unnecessarily—every day we sit around trying to avoid the inevitable. There's no way anyone can determine a child has received the benefits of an esem, Dorothy. If you can arrange things so you give him the news in your office, you can apply the procedure in complete privacy—without the slightest possibility anyone will know you've done it. If his parents give you a nice legal, properly authorized permission statement later on, you can pretend you executed the esem then."

"I'm well aware no one will be able to prove I administered the esem without a legal authorization, Dr. Barian. You've pointed that out to me at least four times in the last two weeks."

"I understand your feelings, Dorothy. You aren't the first therapist who's been put in a position like this. All I can tell you is that if he were my patient I would have resolved the whole issue two weeks ago. The whole idea of requiring parental consent in a situation like this is absurd. Deni's parents are the last people in the universe who could possibly understand why he needs that kind of help."

"Sergeant Wei would have agreed to the esem sooner or later. Every report I've given you for the last ten weeks contains some indication she would have given me her consent sometime in the next few months. We both know her husband would have given in sooner or later just to keep the peace, once she started working on him."

"But she didn't. And now she's never going to."

Captain Min's screen blinked. The face of her commanding officer, Medical Colonel Pao, popped onto the lower left hand corner.

"I have a message for you from General Lundstrom, Dorothy. Can I assume you've already been advised of the news regarding Rinaswandi?"

"I've just been looking at the report on Trans-Solar, sir. My mentor, Dr. Barian, is on the line with me now—listening in."

"General Lundstrom apparently recorded this message only five minutes after she got the news herself. She wants to know if you still want to discuss the esem procedure with Sergeant Kolin."

Captain Min swallowed. "Does that mean Sergeant Wei is definitely considered a casualty?"

"Are you serious?" Dr. Barian murmured. "I can't believe you could still think anything else, Dorothy."

"I'm afraid that has to be the assumption," Colonel Pao said. "We're still listening for messages from Rinaswandi, but I don't think anybody's very optimistic."

"Can you advise General Lundstrom I said yes, sir? Tell them I'll need about an hour to prepare a statement for Sergeant Kolin. The communications time lag between here and the ships is almost eleven minutes now. There's no way I can engage in a real discussion with him."

"Let me talk to your colonel," Dr. Barian said.

Captain Min stared at him. She started to turn him down and reluctantly decided the combative glint in his eye was a good indication he would respond with an embarrassing flurry of argument. "Dr. Barian would like to discuss something with you, Colonel Pao."

"Can you ask him if it's absolutely necessary?"

Captain Min stopped for a moment and switched to the section of her brain cells that contained her ability to speak in Techno Mandarin. She had been talking to Colonel Pao in Ghurkali—the official working language of the Fourth International Brigade. Dr. Barian had picked up a good listening knowledge of Ghurkali, but she knew he would be more comfortable speaking one of the three international languages.

"Colonel Pao wants to know if it's absolutely necessary, Dr. Barian."

"At this point I would say it's about as necessary as anything I've ever done."

She raised her eyebrows a fraction of a centimeter, to let Colonel Pao know she was having problems, and the colonel gave her a nod and answered in the language she had chosen. "Go ahead, Dorothy."

She tapped the buttons that would turn the situation into a full conference call and Dr. Barian started talking as soon as Colonel Pao's face appeared on the screen.

"Dr. Min has made three attempts to communicate with Deni Weikolin's parents, Colonel Pao. I assume you've read the reports she's submitted to General Lundstrom."

"I read every word in them before I forwarded them with my approval, Dr. Barian."

"Then I assume you recognize the gravity of the present situation. The ego-strengthening personality modification is the treatment of choice in situations in which a child is being subjected to the strains Deni has been absorbing. It's an absolute necessity when one of the parents who has been responsible for those strains dies prematurely. We are discussing one of the best documented phenomena in the literature. No child Deni's age can deal with the guilt that is going to begin eating at his sense of self-worth the moment he hears his mother is dead. His primary reaction to his mother's death will be the creation of a cluster of unconscious guilt feelings that will distort his entire personality."

Colonel Pao nodded politely. "I'm well aware of that, sir. Captain Min included all that information in her reports."

"Under normal circumstances," Dr. Barian said, "we could continue with the standard procedure Dr. Min has been following. Dr. Min would continue counseling the parents three times a week for another year. Eventually they would acquire some insight into Deni's needs and give her permission to proceed with the modification procedure. Dr. Min asked for permission to continue the counseling sessions when the Akara crisis broke out and it was denied her on the ground that it would subject Deni's parents to too much stress at a time when they might be forced to carry out the more violent aspects of their military duties. She then asked for permission to discuss the situation with them just once, to see

if they might agree to the modification as an emergency procedure. We've now spent *two weeks* waiting for a reply. All our efforts to contact Deni's parents have met with bureaucratic delaying tactics. And now that we're in an emergency situation—now that the very thing we feared has happened—your general has finally seen some sense and agreed to let us ask a man who's under extreme stress for permission to do something we should have done days ago."

Colonel Pao frowned. "Are you telling me you don't believe Captain Min should accept General Lundstrom's offer, Dr. Barian?"

"I think it's time someone pointed out that Captain Min hasn't been *permitted* to talk to Deni's parents. We're going to be talking to Deni's father under the worst possible conditions. If our efforts fail—the primary reason will be the fact that we've been forced into this position because your general and her staff have spent the last two weeks doing everything they could to evade their responsibilities."

Colonel Pao belonged to a sub-group that the sociologists who studied the military community sometimes referred to as the "military aristocracy." Members of his family had been serving in United Nations military units since the years in which the first international brigades had been formed on Earth. From his earliest days in the army, when he had been a young intern, people had been impressed by the way he always conducted himself with the controlled graciousness of the classic Confucian gentleman.

Two weeks ago, just before the torch ships had left Hammarskjold, Captain Min had spent a few hours with a young surgical captain who had been responsible for loading the hospital equipment. The captain had let his mind wander at a critical moment and the entire loading process had been snarled into a tangle that could have delayed departure by ten hours if Colonel Pao hadn't suddenly started offering courteously phrased "suggestions." The captain was one of the most self-absorbed young men Captain Min had ever known, but even he had been forced to admit that he would have disemboweled a subordinate who had created the kind of mess he had manufactured.

"I realize General Lundstrom may have behaved somewhat cautiously," Colonel Pao said. "I must tell you, however, that I might have tried to postpone a decision on this matter myself, if I were in her position. General Lundstrom is responsible for the lives of four hundred beings. If Sergeant Kolin does go into combat—and we've been given every reason to think combat is unavoidable—the lives of all the people around him could depend on his reactions. General Lundstrom wouldn't have been doing her duty if she hadn't worried about something that could have a significant effect on his emotional state."

"Your bureaucratic maneuvering may have destroyed the future of a defenseless child. If—"

Captain Min's hand leaped to the keyboard. She jabbed at the appropriate buttons and cut the link between Colonel Pao and Dr. Barian.

"Dr. Barian and I will get to work on our statement for Sergeant Kolin right away, sir. Please thank General Lundstrom for me."

"Please give Dr. Barian my regards, Dorothy."

A neutral background color replaced Colonel Pao's face in the lower left quarter of the screen. In the upper left quarter, Dr. Barian was looking at her defiantly.

"We needed to get that on the record," Dr. Barian said. "I made a recording of my side of the conversation, with a record of who else was on the line."

"Colonel Pao is one of the most respected men I've ever known," Captain Min said. "He always treats everybody around him with respect—and they normally respond by treating him the way he treats them."

"He's a military bureaucrat just like everybody else you're dealing with, young woman. You should have put a statement like that in your files the day he and the rest of your military *colleagues* started giving you the runaround."

The director of the childcare center looked relieved when he realized he wouldn't have to break the news to Deni himself. Two of his full-time charges had parents on Rinaswandi. Eleven of the kids who had parents on the torch ships were old enough to realize Mr. and Mrs. Chen had just demonstrated their parents really were charging into danger.

"I'm sorry we didn't call you right away," the director said. "I'm afraid we've really been in a turmoil here."

Dorothy nodded. "How long can you keep Deni quarantined?"

"He should be all right until just before breakfast—until 0730. We've made it a point not to make any mention of the news when they first wake up, just in case something like this happened, but there's no way we can keep it quiet once the day kids come in."

"He's going to know there's something odd going on as soon as he sees me showing up that early. I'm not exactly one of his favorite people."

"We'll make a private room available. I'll tell the night counselor you need to take Deni into her room as soon as you get there."

Dr. Barian's precise high speed Techno Mandarin broke into the conversation. "Dr. Min needs to take her patient directly to her office. This situation has important therapeutic ramifications. She needs to see him in a place where she can spend as much time with him as she needs."

"Have somebody tell Deni I've got some extra questions I need to ask him," Dorothy said. "Don't tell him any more than that—make it sound like one of those things grownups do and kids have to put up with. Tell him I'm sorry—tell him I've promised you I'm having strawberry muffins with real butter brought into the office just to make up for it. He claims that's the best thing he and his father eat for breakfast when they're alone together."

Given the communications lag, there was only one way to handle the situation. An autonomous discussion program had to be transmitted to

the torch ship. The program would be outfitted with a general strategy and equipped with critical information and pre-recorded discussions of the treatment. Then they would sit back and watch as their screens told them how Sergeant Kolin had reacted eleven minutes ago.

Dr. Barian had reviewed almost every session Dorothy had spent with Sergeant Kolin. He quibbled with her over some of the numerical estimates she plugged into the program, but no one could argue with her overall evaluation of the sergeant's personality structure.

Deni's father had grown up in an "extended family network" that had been created by a complicated series of divorces and regroupings. He had spent his formative years in a complex web of relationships in which no one and everyone was responsible for the children. His emotional development had been shaped by a situation in which he and nine other children were involved in a ceaseless competition for the love and praise of thirty adults who were heavily involved in their own competitions and interactions. He had never experienced the love of someone who considered him the absolute dead center of the universe. He had covered up his own lack of self-esteem by convincing himself he had enough self-esteem for twenty people. Then he had buried his insecurities a couple of meters deeper by telling himself other people were just as bouncy and assertive as he thought he was. His son, he had told Dorothy on several occasions, was about as stuck on himself as a boy could be. Deni would have been a lot easier to handle, Sergeant Kolin believed, if his mother hadn't succumbed to the delusion she had given birth to a genius.

Sergeant Wei and Sergeant Kolin belonged to the class that created some of the worst problems military family therapists had to live with. They were both people who responded to the enticements of the recruiting commercials precisely because their own childhoods had been developmental disasters. Deni's mother had pushed and punished because she herself had grown up in a family that had lived on the edge of chaos. His father had hammered at him because it was the only way Sergeant Kolin could deny the existence of the hungry boy inside himself.

If someone had put Deni's parents inside an esem treatment chamber at some point in *their* childhoods, their son might not be facing a psychological catastrophe. Essentially, the esem was supposed to endow Deni with a powerful, totally unsmashable feeling that he was a worthwhile person. In families where everything was working the way it was supposed to, the child developed that feeling from parents who communicated—day after day, year after year—a normal amount of love and a general sense that the child was valued. Deni would get it in two hours, with the help of half a dozen drugs and an interactive, multi-sensory program. The drugs would throw him into a semi-conscious state, immerse him in an ocean of calm, and dissolve his defenses against persuasion. The program would monitor all the standard physiological reactions while it bombarded him with feelings, ideas, and experiences that "rectified the deficits in his domestic environment." The intervention was

usually applied three times, over the period of a month, but even one application could be helpful.

In the midst of winter, a twentieth century philosopher named Albert Camus had once said, *I found that there was in me an invincible summer*. For the rest of his life, no matter how he was treated, Deni would be held erect by the summer the esem would plant in the center of his personality.

So how should they convince an exceptionally un-esem'd adult male that he should let them transform his son into the kind of person he thought he was? Dorothy had originally assumed Deni's mother would be the one who accepted the need for the esem. Once Sergeant Wei had acquired some insight into the realities of her family life, Dorothy had believed, there was a good chance she would buy the esem for the same reasons she bought expensive learning programs and other products that could help her son "achieve his full potential." And once Deni's mother had made up her mind, the relevant analyses all indicated Sergeant Kolin would eventually let her have her way.

Their best hope, in Dorothy's view, was an appeal to some of the most powerful emotions nurtured by the military culture. Normally Sergeant Kolin would have rooted himself behind an armored wall as soon as anyone claimed his son needed special treatment. Now they could get around his defenses by claiming Deni was a combat casualty. The program should play on the idea that Deni had been wounded, Dorothy argued. It should portray the esem as a kind of emotional antibiotic.

Dr. Barian wanted to work with the emotional dynamics that coupled guilt with idealization. The Kolin-Wei marriage, in Dr. Barian's opinion, had been one of the worst mixtures of dependency and hostility he had ever examined. It had been so bad he felt confident they could assume Sergeant Kolin had already started idealizing his wife's memory. Their best approach, therefore, would be an appeal that treated the esem as if it were primarily supposed to help Deni deal with the loss of his mother. Dorothy was correct when she objected that the idealization process usually didn't acquire any real force for several days—but Dr. Barian wouldn't be surprised, in this case, if it had kicked into action the moment Sergeant Kolin had been advised his wife might be dead.

"We're talking about one of the fundamental correlations in the literature, Dorothy. The worse the relationship, the stronger the tendency to idealize."

Dorothy started to argue with him, then glanced at the clock and compromised. The program would open with the combat casualty approach and follow it with a couple of tentative comments on the special problems of boys who had lost their mothers. If Sergeant Kolin made a response that indicated he was already locked into the idealization process, the program would shift tracks and start developing the idea that the boy needed special help because he had lost the support of a special person.

The really divisive issue was the description of the therapy. Dr. Barian

wanted her to prepare a description that talked about the procedure as if they were merely going to bathe Deni in love. They *might* include a hint that they were trying to replace the love Deni had lost when his mother had died. But there would be no reference whatsoever to the effect on the patient's self-image.

That was a little like describing an antibiotic without mentioning it killed germs, of course. Dr. Barian apparently had his own ideas about the meaning of the term "informed consent." In his case, the important word was obviously "consent."

Deni would have been surprised to hear it, but he and his parents were only the second family Captain Min had ever worked with. Her original doctorate had been a Ph.D. in educational psychology, not family therapy. The Secretariat had paid for it and she had assumed she would pay off the debt by spending six years in uniform working with military training systems. Instead, the military personnel experts had looked at the data on their screens and discovered the Fourth International Brigade had a pressing need for family therapists. A crash program had been set up and she had spent her first eighteen months as an officer working on a second doctorate—under the guidance of a civilian mentor who apparently believed there was an inverse relationship between intelligence and the number of years someone had spent in the military. In her case, in addition, Dr. Barian had seemed to feel her childhood had subtracted an additional twenty points from her IQ.

It was the first time she had encountered someone with Dr. Barian's attitude. She had spent two years in a lunar "socialization academy" when she had been a teenager, but 80 percent of the children in her cohort had been the offspring of military people and international bureaucrats. At first she had thought Dr. Barian was trying to probe her responses to the kind of stresses she might receive from her patients. Then she had decided she would just have to ignore his comments on her "contaminated upbringing."

Dr. Barian had hammered at her resolution as if he thought his career depended on it. Much of her training involved long sessions with simulations of patient-therapist relationships. Most of the simulated people who appeared on her screens were trapped in simulated messes that were so foolish—and believable—that she frequently found herself wondering how the human race had made it to the twenty-second century. In the critiques that followed the simulations, Dr. Barian loved to remind her that her reactions to her imaginary patients had probably been distorted by the "inadequacies" in her own "formative environment."

"My upbringing was about as good as it could be, Dr. Barian," she had told him once. "I may have more sympathy for the way military people look at things than you do, but it isn't because anybody indoctrinated me. My father may not have been the most loving man who ever lived, but he was so responsible he must have scanned half the research that's been done on military families in the last fifty years. He must have

interviewed half a dozen foster care candidates every time he had to leave me alone, just to make sure they really would give me a consistent environment, just like all the literature said they should."

Naturally, Dr. Barian had then started questioning her feelings about her father.

Nineteen years ago, when Dorothy had been six, she had sat on a rug that had looked exactly like the shaggy rug Deni and his schoolmates sat on when they received their daily briefing. In her case, the orbital diagram on the screen had only contained two symbols—a circle that represented a single torch ship and an oval that represented a Lumina Industries mining asteroid.

The 150 men and women who had taken over the asteroid had belonged to a group that had somehow convinced themselves the city of Rome, on Earth, was the center of all evil and the sole reason mankind could not achieve political perfection. They had killed fifty people in a surprise attack that had put them in control of the torch that was supposed to shove the asteroid and its load of minerals into orbit around the Earth. Then they had set up their defensive weaponry and placed the asteroid on a course that would bring it down somewhere on the southern Italian peninsula. Her father, Pilot Sergeant Min, had made eight ferry trips to the surface of the asteroid, carrying assault troops and heavy weapons.

Her father had been her only parent for most of her childhood, but there had been no danger she would ever succumb to guilt feelings if he had happened to die in combat. After her mother had left them, her father had shouldered full responsibility for her upbringing—and carried out his parental duties in the same way he had fulfilled every other obligation life had loaded on him.

It hadn't been a natural thing, either. Her father was currently living in retirement in Eratosthenes Crater, on the Moon, and she knew he was perfectly content with a relationship that was limited to bi-weekly phone calls. He was, at heart, the kind of man who was happiest when he was hanging around with other adults like himself. As far as she could tell, he now spent most of his waking hours with a group of cronies whose idea of Heaven was an NCO club that never closed.

The last time she had talked to him, she had been looking for advice on the best way to speed up consideration of her request to speak to Deni's parents. It had been a serious matter, but they had both enjoyed the way he had folded his arms over his chest and pondered the subject with all the exaggerated, slightly elephantine dignity of a senior NCO who had been asked to give a junior officer his best advice.

"Are you asking me, Captain, if I'm still connected with the sergeant's network?"

"I did have something like that in mind, Sergeant."

"As it turns out, I do have a friend who has a certain position on General Lundstrom's staff. I'd rather not mention her name, but I suspect she might be willing to give me some useful advice on the best way to

slip your next report past the General's aides. She might even give it a little judicious help if I gave her some good reasons to do it."

"That would be most helpful, Sergeant."

"Then I shall attend to it with the utmost dispatch, Captain."

Military parents like Deni's father and mother had a well-documented tendency to think of the family as a military unit, with the parents as the officers, and the children, inevitably, as members of the lower ranks. Her father had called her "Lieutenant" from the time she was two years old. For most of her childhood, she had seen herself as a younger person who was being guided and supported by an experienced, gently ironic senior who respected her potential.

It was 02:04 by the time they got the program ready for transmission. At 02:15 the transmission began to arrive at the ship. At 02:20 Sergeant Kolin sat down in front of a screen and started watching Dorothy's presentation. At 02:31 his face appeared on Dorothy's communication screen and she got her first look at his response to her efforts.

The program opened with a recording in which Dorothy discussed the effects of combat deaths on children. The presentation was calm, statistical, and scrupulously accurate. On the auxiliary screen on her right, she could watch her neat, fully-uniformed image and correlate the statements it was making with the reactions flickering across Sergeant Kolin's face.

"Do you have any questions about anything I've said so far?" the recording asked.

Sergeant Kolin shook his head. He had always kept his guard up during their counseling sessions and he was falling into the same pattern now. Most of her information about his personality came from his responses to inter-active video dramas. The dramas that had worked had usually been designed so they practically forced the subject to make a response.

Dorothy's hands tightened on her desk top. She hated watching herself make presentations. Every flaw in her delivery jumped out at her. She saw her head dip just a fraction of a centimeter—a brief, tiny lapse in concentration—and she winced at the way she had telegraphed the fact that she was about to say something significant.

"In this case," the Dorothy on the screen said, "there's the added factor that the parent who's become a casualty is the child's mother. The relationship between a young boy and his mother frequently includes emotional overtones that can't be replaced by any other kind of relationship."

Her image paused for a carefully timed instant—a break that was supposed to give Sergeant Kolin the chance to start a response. He leaned forward with the beginning of a frown on his face and a subtitle lit up on the auxiliary screen. *Light positive response detected. Continuing probe.*

The program's visual interpretation capabilities were limited to relatively large-scale body movements, but Dorothy had been able to list

three actions that should be given extra weight—and the first item on the list had been that tendency to lean forward. Sometimes, if you waited just a moment longer, Sergeant Kolin would lean a little further and say something that could lead to three minutes of real discussion.

This time he just settled back again. If he had started idealizing his wife's memory, he apparently didn't feel like expressing the feelings the idealization had aroused.

"I'm afraid there's a good possibility he's just angry," Dorothy said. "This isn't the first time I've seen that kind of tight-lipped expression."

"Angry at us?" Dr. Barian said.

"He really hates the whole idea of people examining his feelings. He looks like he's in one of those moods where he'd like to pick up his chair and throw it at the screen."

The program had apparently reached a similar conclusion. Her image had already slipped into a sentence that treated the mother-son relationship as if it was merely a side issue. The sound system let out a blip, to remind Sergeant Kolin he was looking at a recording, and the program switched to her description of the therapy.

Dorothy had drastically revised her standard description. She had included a shot of the treatment chamber, but the shot only showed part of the cover and it only lasted a couple of seconds.

She had done everything she could to make it clear they weren't "rewiring" Deni. "To a large extent," the video Dorothy said, "we're just giving Deni in advance the effects of all the love he's going to be missing during the next few years." She had touched on the danger of guilt feelings, but she had skipped over the relationship between guilt and the anger evoked by demanding parents.

The program reached a check point. "Do you have any comments you would like to make, Sergeant Kolin? Please feel free to speak as freely as you want to. This program can answer almost any question you can ask."

Sergeant Kolin leaped out of his chair. His head disappeared from the screen for a moment. The camera readjusted its field of vision and focused on a face that was contorted with rage.

Deni's father had been trained in the same NCO schools every sergeant in the Fourth International Brigade had attended. Sergeants never belted. Their voices dropped to tight, controlled murmurs that made the anger on their faces look a hundred times more intense.

"My son doesn't need people poking into his brain," Sergeant Kolin said. "My son will get all the attention he needs from the person who's supposed to give it to him."

Dorothy's image stared at him while the program raced through alternative responses. The screen dissolved into an abstract pattern that was supposed to be emotionally neutral. An avuncular synthetic voice took over the conversation.

"We're sorry if we've angered you, Sergeant Kolin," the voice said. "We're trying to explain this procedure under difficult circumstances."

Captain Min has prepared answers to most of the questions people raise when they're asked to approve this type of emotional intervention."

Dorothy bit her lip. Her right hand hovered over her notebook with the stylus poised to start writing—as if some part of her nervous system still didn't believe her orders had to cross eleven light minutes before they evoked a response from the program.

She had prepared a statement the program could jump to if Sergeant Kolin expressed his basic hostility to the very idea of psychological "tampering." The program should have switched to the statement, but it had responded to his display of anger instead.

"This isn't working," Dr. Barian murmured.

Sergeant Kolin dropped into his armchair. He rested his hands on his knees and stared at the screen.

"Tell Captain Min to continue," Sergeant Kolin said.

Dorothy's hand started inscribing instructions on her notebook. "He knows he's being recorded," she said. "He knows he has to give us a minimum amount of cooperation. He may be ready to explode but he's still thinking about his career, too."

"So he'll sit there. And listen. And say no."

Her image had returned to the screen. The program had switched to her review of the psychological dangers faced by children who had lost a parent—a review she had included in the program so it could be used in situations in which they needed to mark time. The program was still reacting to his anger. There was no indication it was going to deal with his feelings about psychological intervention.

She drew a *transmit* symbol at the bottom of her last instruction and her orders began creeping across the Solar System. Eleven minutes ago the program had made a misjudgement. Eleven minutes from now—twenty-two minutes after the original mistake—it would receive a message ordering it to deal with Sergeant Kolin's hostility to psychological tampering.

"You've done about as well anyone could have, Dorothy," Dr. Barian said. "I couldn't have done it any better myself. It isn't your fault they made you wait so long you had to work through a program."

"It should have understood," Dorothy said. "It should have switched to the psychological tampering track as soon as he made that remark about people poking holes in his son's brain. It shouldn't have let that slip past it."

"The anger response was too strong. It picked up the anger and it didn't hear the content. You aren't the first person who's seen a program make a mistake she would have avoided."

Sergeant Kolin had sat like that for a big part of half the sessions she'd had with him. His eyes were fixed on the screen. His face looked attentive and interested. And she knew, from experience, that he wasn't hearing one word in three.

"It isn't your fault, Dorothy. You might have had a chance if they'd let you talk to him when the time lag was only a couple of minutes."

They fiddled around with your request and now you've got a hopeless situation."

She wrote another set of commands on her notebook and bent over the dense, black-on-yellow format she had chosen the last time she had felt like fooling around with her displays. Somewhere in the mass of information she had collected on Sergeant Kolin there had to be a magic fact that would drill a hole through his resistance.

"Your patient is in exactly the same position as a child who's dying of a disease," Dr. Barian said. "Would you wait for his father's permission—or some general's permission—if he needed a new lung or a new spinal cord? Your first responsibility is to that child—not some set of rules thought up by people who are still living in the Dark Ages."

The last useless paragraphs in Sergeant Kolin's file scrolled across her notebook. She raised her head and discovered Dr. Barian was regarding her with an expression that actually looked understanding.

"There's another consideration you might want to factor into your decision making process," Dr. Barian said. "It may be your friend Colonel Pao is right—maybe General Lundstrom's staff did do the right thing when they decided her mental state is so delicate they might be endangering four hundred combat troops if they bothered her with a difficult matter like this. It's also true that the military personnel on those ships are all volunteers. They *agreed* to take the risk they're taking. Deni didn't volunteer for anything."

She had dispatched her new set of instructions at 02:58. At 03:09 it arrived at the torch ship. At 03:20 she saw the program switch to the path it should have taken in the first place. At 03:40, she ordered it to switch to the termination routine and started waiting for the images that would tell her Sergeant Kolin had refused permission. Dr. Barian started talking the moment she took her eyes off her notebook.

She picked up Deni at the door of the childcare center, in a cart she had requested from Special Services when it had finally occurred to her they would probably provide her with anything she asked for "under the circumstances." She had even been given a route that had been specially—and unobtrusively—cleared of any traffic that might cause her problems. A few of the pedestrians stared when they saw a cart with a child sitting in the passenger seat, but they all looked away as soon as their brains caught up with their reflexes.

Hammar skjold Station was a military base, so its public spaces looked something like the public spaces of a civilian space city and something like the decks of a torch ship. The corridors had been landscaped with trees, fountains, and little gardens, just like the corridors in lunar cities, but it had all been done in the hyper-manicured style that characterized most military attempts at decorating. The doors that lined the walls came in four sizes and three colors. The gardens were spaced every hundred meters and they all contained one tree, a carpet of flowers that was

as trim as a major's mustache, and two (2), three (3), or four (4) shrubs selected from a list of twenty (20).

"I thought I wasn't supposed to see you until after lunch," Deni said.

"I had to make some changes in my schedule," Dorothy said, with deliberate vagueness.

"Am I going to have to see you during breakfast from now on?"

"It's just this once."

The big, utilitarian elevator near the childcare center opened as soon as the cart approached it. It went directly to the fourth level without stopping, and she turned left as she cleared the door and started working her way around the curve of the giant wheel that had been her home since the day she had been born.

The strawberry muffins had big chunks of real strawberries embedded in them. The butter had been synthesized in a Food Services vat, but to everyone who lived off-Earth, it was "the real thing"—an expensive, luxurious alternative to the cheaper look-alikes. The milk in the big pitcher was flavored with real strawberries, too—and laced with a carefully measured dose of the tranquilizer that had given her the best results when she had slipped it to him in the past.

"Did I get the muffins the same temperature your father gets them?" Dorothy said.

Deni stopped chewing for a moment and nodded politely. He never talked with his mouth full. His mother had dealt with that issue before he was three.

"Are we talking about my feelings some more?"

"Maybe later. Right now—why don't we just relax and have breakfast? I'm kind of fond of real butter myself."

"How many can I have?"

"Well, I bought six. And I'll probably only be able to eat two myself. I'd say you can count on eating at least three."

She glanced at the notebook sitting beside her coffee cup. The chair Deni was sitting in looked like a normal dining chair, but it was packed with the same array of non-invasive sensors that had been crammed into the therapeutic chair he normally used. His heart-beat, blood pressure, muscle tension, and movement-count all agreed with the conclusion a reasonably sensitive human being would have drawn from the enthusiasm with which he was biting into his muffin.

Deni had finished the last bite of his second muffin and given her a quick glance before he reached for the third. The numbers on the notebook were all advancing by the appropriate amount as the tranquilizer took hold.

She stood up and strolled toward her desk with her coffee cup in her hand. "Take your time, Deni. Don't worry about it if you decide you can't finish it."

She called up a status report on her desk screen and stared at the same

numbers she had gone over only two hours ago. The drugs she needed for the esem were all sitting in the appropriate places on her shelves. The devices that were supposed to deliver the drugs were all functional. The components that would deliver the appropriate images, sounds, and sensations all presented her with green lights when she asked for an equipment check.

She had thought about putting Deni under and checking the current state of his feelings but she had known it was a stupid idea as soon as it had popped into her head. She knew what his real feelings were. Every test she had run on him in the last three months had confirmed he was still in the grip of the emotions she had observed when she had begun working with him.

She had begun her sessions with Deni with a two hour diagnostic unit in which he had been drugged and semi-conscious. Deni didn't remember any of it, but she had stored every second of the session in her confidential databanks. Any time she wanted to, she could watch Deni's hands curl—as if he was strangling someone—as he relived an evening in which his parents might have killed each other if they hadn't both been experts in the art of falling. She knew exactly what he really thought about the time his father had taken his flute away from him for two weeks. She had observed his childish, bitter rage at the cage of work and study his mother had erected around his life.

She scrawled another code number on her notebook and the results of the work she had done last night appeared on her desk screen. She had been ready to crawl into bed as soon as she had made Deni's travel arrangements but Dr. Barian had insisted they should prepare a complete quantified prognosis. They had spent over fifty minutes haggling over a twenty-two item checklist. Dr. Barian had insisted nineteen of her estimates were wildly out of line and tried to replace every one of them with the most pessimistic numbers he could produce.

In the end, it hadn't really mattered which set of numbers you used. The most optimistic prognosis the program could come up with merely offered some hope that *someday* the boy *might* voluntarily seek out a therapist. *Someday*, just possibly, he *might* ask for the treatment that would pull him out of the emotional swamp that was going to start sucking at his psyche the moment he learned his mother had died.

And that's your best prognosis, Captain. Based on numbers most experienced therapists would consider hopelessly optimistic.

"How are you coming, Deni?"

"I think I'm starting to feel a little burpy, ma'am."

She waved the numbers off the screen and turned around. His glass still held about three fingers of milk.

"I've got a pill I'd like you to take. Can your tummy hold enough milk to help you get a pill down?"

On the main communications screen, Mr. and Mrs. Chen were holding a press conference. The "reporters" were all "volunteers" from their own

Zen-Random congregation, but that was a minor matter. The questions would have been a little different if the Chens had been facing real media types, but the answers would have been the same.

A bona fide journalist, for example, might have asked them how they would answer all the military analysts who thought they had made a tactical mistake when they destroyed Rinaswandi. The phony reporter on the screen had merely asked his leaders if they could tell the people how the attack had improved their military position.

"I think the answer to that is obvious," Mrs. Chen said. "The forces that were guarding Rinaswandi Base can now join the force defending our city. The Secretariat mercenaries will be faced with a force of overwhelming size, with every weapon and vehicle controlled by a volunteer who is prepared to make any sacrifice to preserve the state of moral liberation we have created in our city. . . ."

Every two or three minutes—for reasons Dorothy couldn't quite grasp—the Chens let the camera pick up a bald, slump-shouldered man who seemed to shrink against the wall as soon as he realized a lens was pointed his way. If there was one person in this situation who wasn't going to come out of it alive, Dorothy knew, it was Major Jen Raden—the officer who had betrayed the equipment stashed on Rinaswandi.

Her father was only one-eighth Gurkhali, but no one had ever had to remind him—or any other member of the Fourth International Brigade—that he belonged to an institution which could trace its origins to the Fourth Gurkha Rifles, the ancient, battle-scarred infantry regiment the Indian government had donated to the United Nations in the years when the Secretariat had acquired its first permanent forces. I will keep faith, the Gurkha motto had run—and they had proved it in battle after battle, first in the service of the British Empire, then in the service of the Republic of India, and finally under the flag that was supposed to represent humanity's best response to its own capacity for violence.

A light glowed on Dorothy's communications board. A line of type appeared at the bottom of the screen. *Call from Pilot Sergeant Min. Non-priority.*

On the couch, Deni was still sleeping peacefully. The monitor she had clipped to his wrist was still transmitting readings that indicated he would sleep for the full two hours the deep-sleep pill was supposed to deliver. There were two messages from Dr. Barian in her communications system, but she hadn't looked at either of them.

She tapped the appropriate button on her keyboard. Her father stared at her out of the screen with a blurred, puffy-eyed look that immediately triggered off a memory of beery odors—a memory that was so strong it was hard to believe the communications system could only transmit sounds and images. She wasn't the only member of her family who had been up most of the night.

"Good morning, daughter. I hope I'm not disturbing anything."

"I was just sitting here watching the news. I've got something I'm supposed to do, but I'm giving myself a little break."

"I've been thinking about the family you've been concerned about. It seems to me you indicated one of the parents was stationed on Rinas-wandi. . . ."

She nodded. "It was the mother. The son's sleeping on the couch in my office."

Her father leaned back and folded his arms across his chest—but this time neither of them smiled. She had realized, at some point in her teens, that it was a body posture that frequently indicated he was trying to keep his reactions under control. He arranged his arms like that, she had decided, so he wouldn't run his hands across his face or do something else that might affect the image a good sergeant tried to maintain.

"I was afraid something like that might have happened. Have they told him yet?"

"I told them I'd do it."

"That's not the easiest job you can volunteer for."

"I still haven't told him. I'm letting him sleep while I think about . . . the best way to approach it."

"I only did that twice all the time I was on active duty. If you don't mind me giving you some advice—I never talked to anybody who thought they'd found a good way to do it. Whatever you do, you're not going to be happy with it."

"There's some special problems in this case—some reactions he'll probably have because of the family problems I was trying to deal with."

Sergeant Min frowned. "You were trying to get permission for some special procedure . . . for something that would help him with the possibility his parents might become casualties. . . ."

"We tried to get permission from his father last night and we couldn't do it. Dr. Barian thinks we failed because they stalled us for so long we had to communicate across a big communications lag. I'm inclined to think we might have failed anyway."

"And what does that mean?"

"It means basically that we end up with a human being who's permanently crippled psychologically. I could show you the numbers and explain them but that's what they all add up to. He'll be just as much of a casualty as anybody who's been physically wounded."

"And nobody ever asked him if he wanted to enlist. . . ."

"That's essentially what Dr. Barian said."

"I'm sorry, Dorothy. It sounds to me like you've done everything anyone could have."

"I'm not blaming myself, papa. I'm just sorry it's happening."

"There isn't anything else you can do? There isn't some possibility he'll get some kind of therapy later? When he's old enough to make his own decision?"

"It's possible, but the odds are against it. We're talking about something that will eventually affect almost every aspect of his personality. When a child has certain kinds of problems with his parents, the death

of one of his parents can create unconscious feelings . . . guilt feelings . . . that are so powerful they influence everything he does. People tend to protect the personalities they've acquired. Somebody who's rebellious, unruly, and angry usually isn't going to feel he needs a treatment that will give him a different outlook—even when he isn't satisfied with the kind of life his emotions have led him into."

"Major Raden has a lot to answer for."

"Dr. Barian seems to feel it's mostly General Lundstrom's fault."

"Or some of those babus on her staff."

She shrugged. "They were trying to protect her—to shield her from distractions."

"She's a general. She's supposed to look after her troops. If she can't put up with a little pestering from a medical captain without going into convulsions, she shouldn't be wearing the pips."

When Dorothy had been fourteen, one of her best friends had been plagued with a father who had "confined her to quarters" almost every other weekend—usually for some trivial matter like a dusty piece of furniture or a piece of clothing that didn't look "inspection presentable." Her first boyfriend had been a wary thirteen year old whose father seemed to watch everything his children did for signs of "weakness."

There were people, in Dorothy's opinion, for whom military life was a kind of moral exo-skeleton. Their upbringing had left them with no useful values or goals. The ideals imposed on them by their military indoctrination were the only guidelines they had.

She had never experienced the kind of problems Deni had lived with, but she had no trouble relating her records of his case to the things she had observed during her own childhood. Press one set of buttons and the data base presented you with a recording of a counseling session in which Sergeant Kolin justified a punishment by arguing that people would behave "like animals" if no one imposed any "discipline" on them. Press another set, and you got to watch Sergeant Wei, in a message she had transmitted from Rinaswandi, telling Deni she hoped he was practicing his flute and spending enough time with his learning programs—and never once suggesting she loved him or hoped he was having a little fun.

Press a third combination, and the database gave you a look at the hour she had spent with Deni on the day he had received his tenth message from his mother. They had sat on the couch, side by side, and she had spent most of the session stubbornly trying to evoke some kind of comment on his reactions to his mother's exhortations.

"How did you feel about the length of the message?" the Insistent, Patient Therapist had prodded. "Was it too short? Would you like it better if she sent you a longer message every two or three days?"

Deni shrugged. "It was all right."

The Therapist stifled the natural response of a normal adult and produced an attempt at a conciliatory smile. "Try again, Deni. Is there

anything else you wish your mother had talked about? Besides school? And music practice? We're not here to play, soldier."

She had been dealing with the great problem that confronted every therapist who tried to get military children to talk about their emotions—the trait that had been observed by almost every researcher who had ever explored the child-rearing customs of this odd little sub-culture. The one thing that seemed to be true about all military children was their tendency to pick up, almost at birth, the two great commandments of military life: don't complain, don't talk about your feelings. Her solution had been to tell him it was a task—a duty the officer in command of the situation expected him to fulfill to the best of his ability.

It had helped some, but only some. The resistance she was dealing with couldn't be eliminated by direct orders and nagging persistence. Talk therapy was only a second-best stop-gap—a procedure that she kept up mostly so she could convince herself she was doing something while she waited for the day his mother finally agreed he needed the only help that could do him any good.

He won't have the slightest idea you did it, Dr. Barian had said. His father won't know you did it. No one. Somebody may wonder, fifteen years from now, why a kid with his prognosis has turned out so well, but they'll probably assume he just happened to beat the odds. He'll just have the kind of life he should have—the kind of life you've got.

Deni looked up at her from the couch. His right hand made a little twitching movement.

"You fell asleep," Dorothy said. "I thought I'd let you rest."

He frowned. He was old enough to know she gave him medicines that affected his feelings, but she wasn't sure he realized she would do it without telling him first.

His eyes shifted toward the time strip on her desk. "Can I go home now? Are we finished?"

He pulled up his legs and sat up. "They start play time in ten minutes, Captain Min. It isn't my fault I fell asleep."

"Deni—"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"I'd like you to go sit in the chair you usually sit in. I'd like you to do it now, if you don't mind. There's something I have to talk about with you—something that happened last night."

The ceremony for the people who had died at Rinaswandi took place in the biggest theater in Hammarskjold, two days after the attack. Deni sat in the front row, with the other children whose parents had been killed. Dorothy could watch him, from her place in the ranks of the medical personnel, and note how he was still maintaining the same poise he had adopted in the cart when she had driven him back to the childcare center.

It was the same ceremony she had attended with her father, nineteen

years ago, in memory of the people who had died in the assault on the Lumina mining asteroid. The names of the dead would be read one by one. (Twenty this time, thirty-three then.) A lone trumpeter would play "The Last Post." The minute of silence—timed precisely to the second—would end with the bagpipes roaring into one of the big, whirling, totally affirmative marches the Gurkha regiments had inherited, three hundred years in the past, from the British officers who had introduced them to European military music.

That was how you always did it at a military ceremony. First, you remembered the dead. Then—the moment over, the tribute paid—you returned to the clamor and bustle of life. She lived in a world in which people sometimes died, her father had said when he had explained it to her. You never forgot they had died, but you didn't let it keep you from living.

Her father hadn't asked her if she wanted to go to the Lumina ceremony. And she had known, without being told, that it wasn't something they could discuss. There were some things that had to be left unsaid, even with the kind of father she had. She had never told him, for example, about the nights, the whole year after he had returned from the Lumina "incident," when she had stared at the ceiling of her bedroom and tried to ignore the pictures that kept floating into her head.

She had given Colonel Pao a recommendation for a week of deep-sleep therapy, to be implemented sometime in the next month, and he had indicated he would probably approve it. Colonel Pao didn't think there would be any problems, either, with her recommendation for a long-term follow-up, from now until Deni's legal maturity, that would include any legal procedures that might reduce the damage. If there was one thing everyone in the chain of command understood, it was the plight of a child who had lost a parent in combat.

"... It's the same basic idea you always come back to," she had told Colonel Pao. "The point they always emphasize in all those courses on military ethics they make you take in baby officer's school. My father even explained it to me when I was a child—when I asked him how he could be sure he was doing the right thing when he helped kill people. If you're a soldier... then for you morality is defined by the law. A soldier is someone who engages in legally authorized acts of violence. If you take away the law, then there's no difference between us and a bunch of thugs. If we can't obey the law, too... at least the important laws..."

Dr. Barian hadn't been particularly impressed with her attempts to explain herself, of course. He had stared at her as if she had just suggested they should deal with the Akara situation by poisoning half the people in the asteroid belt.

"The only difference between an army and a bunch of thugs," Dr. Barian had told her, "is that armies work for governments and thugs don't. You turned your back on a helpless child because you felt you had to stick to the letter of some rule a pack of politicians set up so they could

appease a mob of voters who can't tell the difference between an esem and a flogging."

Behind his desk, to the left, Colonel Pao had set up a serenity corner with a composition composed of green plants and dark, unevenly glazed pottery. He had arranged two chairs so they faced it from slightly different angles, and he had insisted they should sit in the chairs and drink tea while they talked. On the sound system a wooden flute had been tracing a long meditative line.

"I take it," Colonel Pao had said, "that you feel you might have proceeded with the esem if you had been a civilian."

Dorothy shrugged. "My father always used to claim that a good sergeant took care of the people under him. I have a feeling that if you took it to a vote half the people on this base might have felt I should have thrown the rules out the airlock and given a casualty whatever he needed."

"And how do you feel about that?"

She shrugged again. "When I think about it that way—I feel like Dr. Barian's absolutely right and I've acted like a priggish junior officer who thinks rules are more important than human beings."

The left side of the serenity corner was dominated by a thin, long-necked jar that would have thrown the entire composition out of balance if it had been one centimeter taller. She focused her eyes on the line of the neck and tried to concentrate on the way it intersected a thin, leafless branch. Then she lost control and snapped her head toward the trim, carefully positioned figure in the other chair.

"He was sitting right in front of me, sir! I had to look him in the face when I told him his mother was dead. I could be watching what this has done to him for the next ten years if I decide to stay in. If I had my way we'd have a law that let us set up some kind of committee—without giving the parents an absolute veto—whenever we got into this kind of emergency. If all the people like Dr. Barian had their way, there wouldn't be any rules at all and we could spend our lives arbitrarily altering people's personalities just because we felt it was good for them. My father, the people on Rinaswandi—they spent their lives trying to build a wall around chaos. There has to be a law regulating personality modification! Even when it's as benign as this one. Just like there have to be laws that tell you when it's all right to engage in violence."

Colonel Pao folded his arms over his chest. He tipped his head to one side—as if he were concentrating on the long arc the flute was describing—and Dorothy settled back in her chair and waited while he collected his thoughts.

He had shifted his thought processes to the formal, somewhat bureaucratic phrases he tended to adopt when he communicated in Techno Mandarin. "It is my personal opinion," he said, "that any responsible observer would have to agree that you did everything anyone could reasonably expect you to do. You took everything into account—including

a point many civilians have trouble understanding. You did everything you could to get a favorable response from Sergeant Kolin. You made a real decision, furthermore, when you arrived at the moment when a decision couldn't be postponed. You didn't just stand there and let the situation drift into a decision by default."

Colonel Pao raised his bowl of tea to his lips. He stared at the center of the serenity composition over the top of the bowl and Dorothy waited again.

"I could tell you that I think you made the right choice and try to ease your feelings by providing you with whatever authority I may possess. I could even tell you that you did the wrong thing and try to give you the comforting illusion someone knows what's right and wrong in these situations. The truth is I can't tell you any more than I've already said. If I understood the principles of ethical philosophy as well as I would like to, I think I would conclude that you applied the Confucian principle of reciprocity, even if I couldn't guarantee you made the most ethical choice. You treated Deni the way you probably would want to be treated yourself. If you or I were in Deni's position . . . if someone had to make a decision that might affect us the way this one affects him . . . then I think we would want it to be someone who's been as thoughtful and conscientious as you've been."

He rested his bowl on the tray beside his chair and switched back to Ghurkali—the language of her infancy. "Does that help you, Captain? Does it give you any comfort?"

"I think so, sir. Yes, sir."

"The other thing I think I should say is related to something you and I have in common, so perhaps I'm biased. Still, there have been moments—during the less illustrious interludes in my career—when it's been the only thought that's kept me functioning."

He reached across the space between the chairs and rested his hand on her shoulder. It would have been a perfectly unremarkable gesture if anyone else had done it; in his case it was the first time he had touched her since she had been six years old and the duty officer at the post clinic, young Surgical Captain Pao, had held her hand while the first aid equipment had repaired a greenstick fracture in her left arm. Colonel Pao frequently touched his patients who needed encouragement or reassurance, but he tended to be physically reserved with everyone else.

"Just remember, Dorothy—Deni isn't the only person who didn't volunteer." ●

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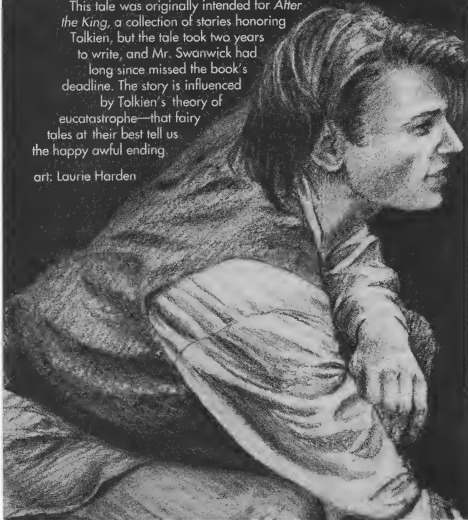
THE CHANGELING'S TALE

Michael Swanwick

"The Changeling's Tale" is Michael Swanwick's homage to J.R.R. Tolkien—the author who turned Mr. Swanwick into a writer.

This tale was originally intended for *After the King*, a collection of stories honoring Tolkien, but the tale took two years to write, and Mr. Swanwick had long since missed the book's deadline. The story is influenced by Tolkien's theory of eucatastrophe—that fairy tales at their best tell us the happy awful ending.

art: Laurie Harden





Fill the pipe again. If I'm to tell this story properly, I'll need its help. That's good. No, the fire doesn't need a new log. Let it die. There are worse things than darkness.

How the tavern creaks and groans in its sleep! 'Tis naught but the settling of its bones and stones, and yet never a wraith made so lonesome a sound. It's late, the door is bolted, and the gates to either end of the Bridge are closed. The fire burns low. In all the world only you and I are awake. This is no fit tale for such young ears as yours, but—oh, don't scowl so! You'll make me laugh, and that's no fit beginning to so sad a tale as mine. All right, then.

Let us pull our stools closer to the embers and I'll tell you all.

I must begin twenty years ago, on a day in early summer. The Ogre was dead. Our armies had returned, much shrunk, from their desperate adventures in the south and the survivors were once again plying their trades. The land was at peace at last, and trade was good. The tavern was often full.

The elves began crossing Long Bridge at dawn.

I was awakened by the sound of their wagons, the wheels rumbling, the silver bells singing from atop the high poles where they had been set to catch the wind. All in a frenzy I dressed and tumbled down from the chimney-loft and out the door. The wagons were painted with bright sigils and sinuous overlapping runes, potent with magic I could neither decipher nor hope to understand. The white oxen that pulled them spoke gently in their own language, one to the other. Music floated over the march, drums and cymbals mingling with the mournful call of the long curling horn named Serpentine. But the elves themselves, tall and proud, were silent behind their white masks.

One warrior turned to look at me as he passed, his eyes cold and unfriendly as a spearpoint. I shivered, and the warrior was gone.

But I had *known* him. I was sure of it. His name was . . .

A hand clasped my shoulder. It was my uncle. "A stirring sight, innit? Those are the very last, the final elven tribe. When they are passed over Long Bridge, there will be none of their kind left anywhere south of the Awen."

He spoke with an awful, alien sadness. In all the years Black Gabe had been my master—and being newborn when my father had marched away to the Defeat of Blackwater, I had known no other—I had never seen him in such a mood before. Thinking back, I see that it was at that instant I first realized in a way so sure I could feel it in my gut that he would someday die and be forgotten, and after him me. Then, though, I was content simply to stand motionless with the man, sharing this strangely companionable sense of loss.

"How can they tell each other apart?" I asked, marveling at how similar were their richly-decorated robes and plain, unfeatured masks.

"They—"

A fire-drake curled in the air, the morning rocket set off to mark the instant when the sun's disk cleared the horizon, and my eyes traveled up to watch it explode. When they came down again, my uncle was gone. I never saw him again.

Eh? Forgive me. I was lost in thought. Black Gabe was a good master, though I didn't think so then, who didn't beat me half so often as I deserved. You want to know about my scars? There is nothing special about them—they are such markings as all the *am'rta skandayaksa* have. Some are for deeds of particular merit. Others indicate allegiance. The triple slashes across my cheeks mean that I was sworn to the Lord Cakar-avartin, a war-leader whose name means "great wheel-turning king." That is a name of significance, though I have forgotten exactly what, much as I have forgotten the manner and appearance of the great wheel-turner himself, though there was a time when I would happily have died for him. The squiggle across my forehead means I slew a dragon.

Yes, of course you would. What youth your age would not? And it's a tale I'd far more gladly tell you than this sorry life of mine. But I cannot. That I did kill a dragon I remember clearly—the hot gush of blood, its bleak scream of despair—but beyond that nothing. The events leading to and from that instant of horror and—strangely—guilt are gone from me entirely, like so much else that happened since I left the Bridge, lost in mist and forgetfulness.

Look at our shadows, like giants, nodding their heads in sympathy.

What then? I remember scrambling across the steep slate rooftops, leaping and slipping in a way that seems quite mad to me now. Corwin the glover's boy and I were stringing the feast-day banners across the street to honor the procession below. The canvases smelled of mildew. They were stored in the Dragon Gate in that little room above the portcullis, the one with the murder hole in the floor. Jon and Corwin and I used to crouch over it betimes and take turns spitting, vying to be the first to hit the head of an unsuspecting merchant.

Winds gusted over the roofs, cold and invigorating. Jumping the gaps between buildings, I fancied myself to be dancing with the clouds. I crouched to lash a rope through an iron ring set into the wall just beneath the eaves. Cor had gone back to the gateroom for more banners. I looked up to see if he were in place yet and realized that I could see right into Becky's garret chamber.

There was nothing in the room but a pallet and a chest, a small table

and a washbasin. Becky stood with her back to the window, brushing her hair.

I was put in mind of those stories we boys told each other of wanton women similarly observed. Who, somehow sensing their audience, would put on a lewd show, using first their fingers and then their hairbrushes. We had none of us ever encountered such sirens, but our faith in them was boundless. Somewhere, we knew, were women depraved enough to mate with apes, donkeys, mountain trolls—and possibly even the likes of us.

Becky, of course, did nothing of the sort. She stood in a chaste woolen night-gown, head raised slightly, stroking her long, coppery tresses in time to the faint elven music that rose from the street. A slant of sunlight touched her hair and struck fire.

All this in an instant. Then Cor came bounding over her roof making a clatter like ten goats. He shifted the bundle of banners 'neath one arm and extended the other. "Ho, Will!" he bellowed. "Stop daydreaming and toss me that rope-end!"

Becky whirled and saw me gawking. With a most unloving shriek of outrage, she slammed the shutters.

All the way back to the tavern, my mind was filled with thoughts of Becky and her hairbrush. As I entered, my littlest cousin, Thistle, danced past me, chanting, "elves-elves-elves," spinning and twirling as if she need never stop. She loved elves and old stories with talking animals and all things bright and magical. They tell me she died of the whitepox not six years later. But in my mind's eye she still laughs and spins, evergreen, immortal.

The common room was empty of boarders and the table planks had been taken down. Aunt Kate, Dolly, and my eldest sister Eleanor were cleaning up. Kate swept the breakfast trash toward the trap. "It comes of keeping bad company," she said grimly. "That Corwin Glover and his merry band of rowdies. Ale does not brew overnight—he's been building toward this outrage for a long time."

I froze in the doorway vestibule, sure that Becky's people had reported my Tom-Peepery. And how could I protest my innocence? I'd've done as much and worse long ago, had I known such was possible.

A breeze leapt into the room when Eleanor opened the trap, ruffling her hair and making the dust dance. "They gather by the smokehouse every sennight to drink themselves sick and plot mischief," Dolly observed. "May Chandler's Anne saw one atop the wall there, making water into the river, not three nights ago."

"Oh, fie!" The trash went tumbling toward the river and Eleanor

slammed the trap. Some involuntary motion on my part alerted them to my presence then. They turned and confronted me.

A strange delusion came over me then, and I imagined that these three gossips were part of a single mechanism, a twittering machine going through predetermined motions, as if an unseen hand turned a crank that made them sweep and clean and talk.

Karl Whitesmith's boy has broken his indenture, I thought.

"Karl Whitesmith's boy has broken his indenture," Dolly said.

He's run off to sea.

"He's run off to sea," Kate added accusingly.

"What?" I felt my mouth move, heard the words come out independent of me. "Jon, you mean? Not Jon!"

How many 'prentices does Karl have? Of course Jon.

"How many 'prentices does Karl have? Of course Jon."

"Karl spoiled him," Kate said (and her words were echoed in my head before she spoke them). "A lad his age is like a walnut tree which suffers not but rather benefits from thrashings." She shook her besom at me. "Something the likes of you would do well to keep in mind."

Gram Birch amazed us all then by emerging from the back kitchen.

Delicate as a twig, she bent to put a plate by the hearth. It held two refried fish, leftovers from the night before, and a clutch of pickled roe. She was slimmer than your little finger and her hair was white as an aged dandelion's. This was the first time I'd seen her out of bed in weeks; the passage of the elves, or perhaps some livening property of their music, had brought fresh life to her. But her eye was as flinty as ever. "Leave the boy alone," she said.

My delusion went away, like a mist in the morning breeze from the Awen.

"You don't understand!"

"We were only—"

"This saucy lad—"

"The kitchen tub is empty," Gram Birch told me. She drew a schooner of ale and set it down by the plate. Her voice was warm with sympathy, for I was always her favorite, and there was a kindly tilt to her chin. "Go and check your trots. The head will have subsided by the time you're back."

Head in a whirl, I ran upbridge to the narrow stairway that gryed down the interior of Tinker's Leg. It filled me with wonder that Jon—gentle, laughing Jon—had shipped away. We all of us claimed to be off to sea someday; it was the second or third most common topic on our nighttime eeling trips upriver. But that it should be Jon, and that he should leave without word of farewell!

A horrible thing happened to me then: With the sureness of prophecy

I knew that Jon would not come back. That he would die in the western isles. That he would be slain and eaten by a creature out of the sea such as none on the Bridge had ever imagined.

I came out at the narrow dock at the high-water mark. Thoughts elsewhere, I pulled in my lines and threw back a bass for being shorter than my forearm. Its less fortunate comrades I slung over my shoulder.

But as I was standing there on the dark and slippery stones, I saw something immense and silent move beneath the water. I thought it a monstrous tortoise at first, such as that which had taken ten strong men with ropes and grappling hooks to pull from the bay at Mermaid Head. But as it approached I could see it was too large for that. I did not move. I could not breathe. I stared down at the approaching creature.

The surface of the river exploded. A head emerged, shedding water. Each of its nostrils was large enough for a man to crawl into. Its hair and beard were dark, like the bushes and small trees that line the banks upriver and drown in every spring flood. Its eyes were larger than cart-wheels and lustreless, like stone.

The giant fixed his gaze upon me, and he spoke.

What did he say, you ask? I wonder that myself. In this regard, I am like the victim of brigands who finds himself lying by the wayside, and then scrabbles in the dust for such small coppers as they may have left behind. What little I possess, I will share with you, and you may guess from it how much I have lost. One moment I stood before the giant and the next I found myself tumbled into the river. It was late afternoon and I was splashing naked with the knackery boys.

I had spent most of that day mucking out the stables in the Approach, part of an arrangement Black Gabe had made whereby the Pike and Barrel got a half a penny for each guest who quartered a horse there. I was as sweaty and filthy as any of the horses by the time I was done, and had gladly fallen in with the butcher's apprentices who would cleanse themselves of the blood and gore their own labors had besmirched them with.

This was on the south side of the river, below the Ogre Gate. I was scrubbing off the last traces of ordure when I saw the elven lady staring down at me from the esplanade.

She was small with distance, her mask a white oval. In one hand she carried a wicker cage of finches. I found her steady gaze both disconcerting and arousing. It went through me like a spear. My manhood began of its own accord to lift.

That was my first sight of Ratanavivicta.

It lasted only an instant, that vision. The light of her eyes filled and blinded me. And then one of my fellow bathers—Hodge the tanner's son

it was, who we in our innocence considered quite the wildling—leaped upon my back, forcing me under the water. By the time I emerged, choking and sputtering, the elf-woman was gone.

I shoved Hodge away, and turned my gaze over the river. I squinted at the rafts floating downstream, sweepsmen standing with their oars up, and the carracks making harbor from their voyages across the sea. On the far bank, pier crowded upon shack and shanty upon warehouse. Stone buildings rose up behind, rank after rank fading blue into the distance, with here and there a spire or tower rising up from the general ruck.

Long snakelike necks burst from the water, two river lizards fighting over a salmon. A strange elation filled me then and I laughed with joy at the sight.

At sunset the elf-host was still crossing the Bridge. Their numbers were that great. All through the night they marched, lighting their way with lanterns carried on poles. I sat in the high window of a room we had not let that evening, watching their procession, as changing-unchanging as the Awen itself. They were going to the mountains of the uttermost north, people said, through lands no living man had seen. I sat yearning, yearning after them, until my heart could take no more.

Heavily I started down the stairs to bed.

To my astonishment the common room was filled with elves. A little wicker cage hung from a ceiling hook. In it were five yellow finches. I looked down from it to the eyes of a white-masked woman. She crooked a finger beckoningly, then touched the bench to her left. I sat beside her.

An elven lord whose manner and voice are gone from me, a pillar of shadow, Cakaravartin himself, stood by the fireplace with one fingertip lazily tracing the shells and coiled serpents embedded in the stone. "I remember," he said in a dreamy voice, "when there was no ford across the Awenasamaga and these stones were part of Great Asura, the city of the giants."

"But how could you—?" I blurted. Masked faces turned to look at me. I bit my tongue in embarrassment.

"I was here when this bridge was built," the speaker continued unheedingly. "To expiate their sins, the last of the giants were compelled to dismantle their capital and with its stones build to the benefit of men. They were a noble race once, and I have paused here in our quest for *parikasaya* because I would see them once more."

Dolly swept in, yawning, with a platter of raw salmon and another holding a stacked pyramid of ten mugs of ale. "Who's to pay?" she asked. Then, seeing me, she frowned. "Will. You have chores in the morning. Ought not you be abed?"

Reddening, I said, "I'm old enough to bide my own judgment."

An elf proffered a gold coin which, had it been silver, would have paid for the service ten times over, and asked, "Is this enough?"

Dolly smiled and nodded. Starting to my feet, I said, "I'll wake the coin-merchant and break change for you." Ignoring the exasperation that swept aside my sister's look of avaricious innocence.

But the elf-woman at my side stilled me with a touch. "Stay. The coin is not important, and there is much I would have you learn."

As the coin touched Dolly's hand she changed, for the merest instant, growing old and fat. I gawked and then she was herself again. With a flip of her skirts she disappeared with the coin so completely I was not to see her for another twenty years. One of the elves turned to the wall, lifting her mask for a quick sip of ale, restoring it with nothing exposed.

The finch-bearer brought out a leather wallet and opened it, revealing dried herbs within. Someone took a long-stemmed clay tavern pipe from the fireplace rack and gave her it. As Ratanavivicta filled the bowl, she said, "This is *margakasaya*, which in your language means 'the path to extinction.' It is rare beyond your knowing, for it grows nowhere in the world now that we have given up our gardens in the south. Chewed, it is a mild soporific. Worked into a balm it can heal minor wounds. Smoked, it forms a bridge through the years, so that one's thoughts may walk in past times or future, at will."

"How can that be?" I asked. "The past is gone, and the future—who is to say what will happen? Our every action changes it, else our deeds were for naught."

She did not answer, but instead passed the pipe to me. With a pair of tongs she lifted a coal from the fire to light it. I put the stem to my lips, exhaled nervously, inhaled. I drew the smoke deep into my lungs, and a whirring and buzzing sensation rose up from my chest to fill my head, first blinding me and then opening my eyes:

It was night, and Cakaravartin's raiders were crying out in anger and despair, for the enemy had stolen a march on us and we were caught by the edge of the marshes, lightly armed and afoot.

Screaming, crazy, we danced ourselves into a frenzy. At a sign from Cakaravartin, we loosed the bundles from our backs and unfolded a dozen horsehides. We pulled our knives and slashed ourselves across arms and chests. Where the blood fell across the hides, the black loam filled them, lending them form, billowing upward to become steeds of earth, forelegs flailing, nostrils wild, eyes cold and unblinking stars.

Then we were leaping onto our mounts, drawing our swords, galloping toward the east. Where hoof touched sod, fresh earth flowed up into the necromantic beasts, and down again through the rearmost leg.

"Tirathika!"

On hearing my adoptive name, I turned to see Krodasparasa riding maskless alongside me, his markings shining silver on his face. His eyes were gleeful and fey. Krodasparasa gestured, and I tore free of my own mask. I felt my cock stiffen with excitement.

Krodasparasa saw and laughed. Our rivalry, our hatred of each other was as nothing compared to this comradeship. Riding side by side, we traded fierce grins compounded of mockery and understanding, and urged our steeds to greater efforts.

"It's a good day to die," Krodasparasa cried. "Are you ready to die, little brother?" He shifted his sword to his far side so we could clasp hands briefly at full gallop, and then swung it around in a short, fast chop that took all of my skill to evade.

I exhaled.

The common room wrapped itself about me again. I found myself staring up at the aurochs horns nailed as a trophy to the west wall, at the fat-bellied withy baskets hanging from the whale-rib rafters. Overhead, a carved and painted wooden mermaid with elk's antlers sweeping back from her head to hold candles turned with excruciating slowness.

The elf-woman took the pipe from my nerveless fingers. She slid the long stem under her mask so skillfully that not a fingertip's worth of her face showed. Slowly, she inhaled. The coal burned brighter, a wee orange bonfire that sucked in all the light in the room. "That was not what I wished to see," she murmured. She drew in a second time and then handed the pipe on.

Slowly the pipe passed around the room again, coming last of all to me. Clumsily, I accepted it and put the end, now hot, to my lips. I drew the magic in:

I stood on an empty plain, the silk tents of the encampment to my back. Frost rimed the ground in crisscross starbursts. My blood was pounding.

It was a festival night, and we had cut the center-poles for our conical tents twice as high as usual. Small lanterns hung from their tips like stars. All was still. For the *am'rta skandayaksa*, venturing out on a festival night was a great impiety.

Tortured with indecision I turned away and then back again, away and back. I could be killed for what I intended, but that bothered me less than the possibility that I had misread the signs, that I was not wanted. I stood before one particular tent, glaring at it until it glowed like the sun. Finally I ducked within.

Ratanavivicta was waiting for me.

Throwing aside my mask, I knelt before her. Slowly, lingeringly, I slid my fingers beneath her mask and drew it off. Her face was scarred, like the moon, and like the moon it was beautiful and cold. My hand was

black on her breast. A pale nipple peeked between my fingers like the first star of twilight.

"Ahhh," she sighed voicelessly, and the pipe passed to the next hand.

Everything had changed.

You cannot imagine how it felt, after twenty years of wandering, to return at last to Long Bridge. My heart was so bitter I could taste it in my mouth. Two decades of my life were gone, turned to nothing. My memory of those years was but mists and phantoms, stolen away by those I had trusted most. The Dragon Gate was smaller than I remembered it being, and nowhere near so grand. The stone buildings whose spires had combed the passing clouds were a mere three and four stories high. The roadway between them was scarce wide enough to let two carts pass.

My face felt tight and dry. I slid a finger under my mask to scratch at the scar tissue where it touched one corner of my mouth.

Even the air smelled different. The smoky haze of my boyhood, oak and cedar from the chimneys of the rich, driftwood and dried dung from the roofholes of the poor, was changed utterly, compounded now of charcoal and quarry-dug coal with always a sharp tang of sulfur pinching at the nose. Wondrous odors still spilled from the cookshop where old Hal Baldpate was always ready with a scowl and a sugar-bun, but the peppery admixture of hams curing next door was missing, and the smokehouse itself converted to a lens-grinder's shop.

The narrow gap between the two buildings remained, though—do you young ones still call it the Gullet?—and through it rose a light breeze from the Awen. I halted and leaned on my spear. It was exactly here one long-ago evening that Becky had showed me her freckled breasts and then fleered at me for being shocked. Here Jon and I would kneel to divvy up the eggs we'd stolen from the cotes of Bankside which, being off the Bridge, was considered fair game by all good river-brats—I see you smiling! Here I crouched in ambush for a weaver's 'prentice whose name and face and sin are gone from me now, though that folly cost me a broken arm and all of Becky's hard-won sympathy.

Somebody bumped into me, cursed, and was gone before I could turn and crave pardon. I squeezed into the Gullet so others could pass, and stared out over the sun-dazzled river.

Down the Awen, a pyroscaph struggled toward the bay, smoke billowing from its stack, paddles flashing in unison, as if it were a water-beetle enchanted beyond natural size. The merchanters entering and leaving the harbor were larger than I remembered, and the cut of their sails was unfamiliar. Along the banks the city's chimneys had multiplied, pillaring smoke into the darkened heavens. It was a changed world, and one that held no place for such as me.

The ghosts of my youth thronged so thickly about me then that I could not distinguish past from present, memory from desire. It was as if I had turned away for an instant and on turning back discovered myself two decades older.

Fill the bowl again. One last time I would hear the dawn-music of my youth, the sound of lodgers clumping sleepily down the stairs, the clink and rattle of plates and pewter in the kitchen. The quick step of Eleanor returning from the cookshop with her arms full of fresh-smelling bread. The background grumbles of Black Gabe standing just out of sight, finding fault with my work.

What a cruel contrast to this morning! When I turned away from the Awen, the Bridge was thick with scurrying city-folk, shopkeepers and craftsmen in fussy, lace-trimmed clothes. The air was full of the clicking of their heels. Men and women alike, their faces were set and grim. For an instant my spirit quailed at the thought of rejoining human company. I had spent too many years in the company of owls and wolves, alone in the solitudes of the north, to be comfortable here. But I squared my shoulders and went on.

The old Pike and Barrel stood where it has always stood, midway down the Bridge. From a distance it seemed unbearably small and insignificant, though every stone and timber of it was burned forever into my heart. The tavern-placard swung lazily on its rod. That same laughing fish leaped from that same barrel that a wandering scholar had executed in trade for a night's stay when Aunt Kate was young. I know, for she spoke of him often.

Below the sign a crowd had formed, an angry eddy in the flow of passersby. A hogshead had been upended by the door and atop it a stout man with a sheriff's feather in his cap was reading from a parchment scroll. By him stood a scarecrow underling with a handbell and behind him a dozen bravos with oaken staves, all in a row.

It was an eviction.

Kate was there, crying with rage and miraculously unchanged. I stared, disbelieving, and then, with a pain like a blow to the heart, realized my mistake. This worn, heavy woman must be my sister Dolly, turned horribly, horribly old. The sight of her made me want to turn away. The painted pike mocked me with its silent laughter. But I mastered my unease and bulled my way through the crowd.

Without meaning to, I caused a sensation. Murmuring, the bystanders made way. The sheriff stopped reading. His bravos stirred unhappily, and the scrawny bell-man cringed. The center of all eyes, I realized that there must be some faint touch of the elven glamour that clung to me yet.

"What is happening here?" My voice was deep, unfamiliar, and the words came hesitantly from my mouth, like water from a pump grown stiff with disuse.

The sheriff blusteringly shook his parchment at me. "Don't interfere! This is a legal turning-out, and I've the stavesmen to back me up."

"You're a coward, Tom Huddle, and an evil man indeed to do this to folk who were once your friends!" Dolly shouted. "You're the rich man's lickspittle now! A hireling to miscreants and usurers, and naught more!"

A mutter of agreement went up from the crowd.

The sheriff ducked his massive head and without turning to meet her eye, grumbled, "By damn, Dolly, I'm only doing my—"

"I'll pay," I said.

Tom Huddle gaped. "Eh? What's that?"

I shrugged off my backsack, of thick dwarven cloth embroidered with silk orchids in a woods-elf stitch, and handed my spear to a gangly youth, who almost dropped it in astonishment. That was you, wasn't it? I thought so. The haft is ebony, and heavier than might be thought.

Lashed to the frame, alongside my quiver and the broken shards of what had once been my father's sword, was a leather purse. After such long commerce with elves I no longer clearly knew the value of one coin over another. But there would be enough, that much I knew. The elvenkind are generous enough with things that do not matter. I handed it to my sister, saying, "Take as much as you need."

Dolly stood with the purse in her outstretched hand, making no move to open it. "Who are you?" she asked fearfully. "What manner of man hides his features behind a mask?"

My hand rose involuntarily—I'd forgotten the mask was there. Now, since it no longer served a purpose, I took it off. Fresh air touched my face. I felt dizzy almost to sickness, standing exposed before so many people.

Dolly stared at me.

"Will?" she said at last. "Is it really you?"

When the money had been counted over thrice and the sprig of broom the sheriff had nailed over the doorsill had been torn down and trampled underfoot, the house and neighbors all crowded about me and bore me into the Pike and Barrel's common room and gave me the honored place by the fire. The air was close and stuffy—I could not think. But nobody noticed. They tumbled question upon question so that I had but little chance to answer, and vied to reintroduce themselves, crying, "Here's one you're not expecting!" and "Did you ever guess little Sam would turn out such a garish big gossoon?" and roaring with laughter. Somebody

put a child on my knee, a boy, they said his name was Pip. Somebody else brought down the lute from its peg by the loft and struck up a song.

Suddenly the room was awirl with dancers. Unmoved, I watched them, these dark people, these strangers, all sweaty and imperfect flesh. After my years with the pale folk, they all seemed heavy and earthbound. Heat radiated from their bodies like steam.

A woman with wrinkles at the corners of her eyes and mischief within them drew me up from the stool, and suddenly I was dancing too. The fire cast an ogreish shadow upon the wall behind me and it danced as well, mocking my clumsy steps.

Everything felt so familiar and yet so alien, all the faces of my youth made strange by age, and yet dear to me in an odd, aching way, as if both tavern and Bridge were but clever simulacra of the real thing, lacking the power to convince and yet still able to rend the heart. My childhood was preternaturally clear, as close to me now as the room in which I sat. It was as if I had never left. All the years between seemed a dream.

"You don't know who I am, do you?" my dancing partner said.

"Of course I do," I lied.

"Who, then?" She released me and stood back, hands on hips.

Challenged, I actually *looked* at her for the first time. She moved loosely within her blouse, a plump woman with big brown freckles on her face and forearms. She crossed her arms in a way that caused her breasts to balloon upward, and laughed when I flushed in embarrassment.

Her laughter struck me like the clapper of a great bell.

"Becky!" I cried. "By the Seven, it's you! I never expected—"

"You never expected I'd grow so fat, eh?"

"No, no!" I protested. "It's not—"

"You're a fool, Will Taverner. But that's not totally unbecoming in a man." She drew me into the shadow of the stairway where there was privacy, and a small bench as well. We talked for a long time. And at the end of that conversation I thought she looked dissatisfied. Nor could I account for it until she reached between my legs to feel what was there. My cod, though, was a wiser man than I and stood up to greet her. "Well," she said, "that's a beginning. Cold dishes aren't brought back to a boil in a minute."

She left me.

You look unhappy. Becky's your mam, isn't she? Now that I come to think of it, there's that glint in your eye and a hint at that same diabolus that hides at the edge of her mouth. Well, she's a widow now, which

means she can do as she pleases. But I will horrify you with no more details of what we said.

Where's my pipe? What happened to that pouch of weed? Thank you. I'd be long asleep by now if not for its aid. This is the last trace of the *margakasaya* left in all the world. With me will die even the memory of it, for there are no elves abroad in the realms of men anymore. They have found *parikayasa*, "final extinction" you would say, or perhaps "the end of all." Did you know that *am'rta skandayaksa* means "deathless elf-group"? There's irony there, knew we only how to decipher it.

Maybe I was wrong to kill the dragon.

Maybe he was all that kept them from oblivion.

When we had all shared Cakaravartin's vision of Great Asura and of the giants at labor, their faces stolid and accepting of both their guilt and their punishment, and spoken with Boramohanagarahant, their king, it was almost dawn. Cakaravartin passed around the pipe one more time. "I see that you are determined to come with us," he said to me, "and that is your decision to make. But first you should know the consequences."

Ratanavivicta's mask tilted in a way that I would later learn indicated displeasure. But Cakaravartin drew in deeply and passed the pipe around again. I was trembling when it came to me. The mouthpiece was slick with elf-spit. I put it between my lips.

I inhaled.

At first I thought nothing had happened. The common room was exactly as before, the fire dying low in the hearth, the elkmaid slowly quartering out the air as ever she had done. Then I looked around me. The elves were gone. I was alone, save for one slim youth of about my own age, whom I did not recognize.

That youth was you.

Do I frighten you? I frighten myself far more, for I have reached that moment when I see all with doubled sight and apprehend with divided heart. Pray such possession never seizes you. This—now—is what I was shown all these many years ago, and this is the only chance I will ever have to voice my anger and regret to that younger self, who I know will not listen. How could he? A raggedy taverner's-boy with small prospects and a head stuffed full of half-shaped ambitions. What could I say to make him understand how much he is giving up?

By rights, you should have been my child. There's the bitter nub of the thing, that Becky, who had all but pledged her heart to me, had her get by someone else. A good man, perhaps—they say half the Bridge turned out to launch his fire-boat when he was taken by the dropsy—but not me.

I have lost more than years. I have lost the life I was meant to have,

children on my knee and a goodwife growing old and fat with me as we sank into our dotage. Someone to carry my memory a few paces beyond the emptiness of the grave, and grandchildren to see sights I will not. These were my birthright, and I have them not. In his callowness and ignorance, my younger self has undone me.

I can see him, even now, running madly after the elves, as he will in the shadowy hour before dawn. Heart pounding with fear that he will not catch up, lungs agonized with effort. Furious to be a hero, to see strange lands, to know the love of a lady of the *am'rta skandayaksa*.

They are fickle and cruel, are the elves. Ratanavivicta snatched me from my life on a whim, as casually as she might pick up a bright pebble from the roadside. She cast me aside as easily as she would a gemstone of which she had wearied. There is no faith in her kind.

Ah, it is a dreadful night! The winds prowl the rooftops like cats, bringing in the winter. There'll be frost by morning, and no mistake.

Is the story over, you ask? Have you not been listening? There is no story. Or else it all—your life and mine and Krodasparasa's alike—is one story and that story always ending and never coming to a conclusion. But my telling ends now, with my younger self starting from his dream of age and defeat and finding himself abandoned, the sole mortal awake on all the Bridge, with the last of the elf horde gone into the sleeping streets of the city beyond the Dragon Gate.

He will leap to his feet and snatch up his father's sword from its place over the hearth—there, where my spear hangs now. He will grab a blanket for a cloak and a handful of jerked meat to eat along the road, and nothing more, so great will be his dread of being left behind.

I would not stop him if I could. Run, lad, run! What do you care what becomes of me? Twenty years of glory lie at your feet. The dream is already fading from your head. You feel the breeze from the river as you burst out the door.

Your heart *sings*.

The moment is past. I have been left behind.

Only now can I admit this. Through all this telling, I have been haunted by a ghost and the name of that ghost was Hope. So long as I had not passed beyond that ancient vision, there was yet the chance that I was not my older self at all, but he who was destined to shake off his doubts and leap out that door. In the innermost reaches of my head, I was still young. The dragon was not slain, the road untravelled, the elves alive, the adventures ahead, the magic not yet passed out of the world.

And now, well. I'm home. ●



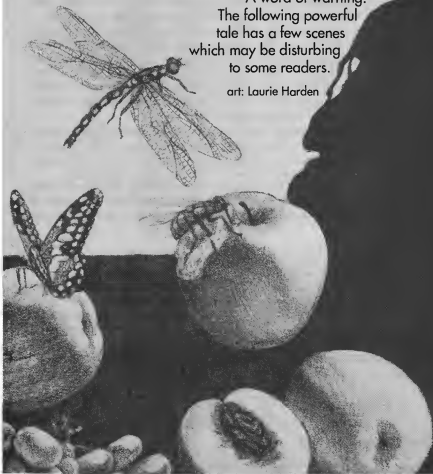
THINGS OF THE FLESH

L. Timmel Duchamp

L. Timmel Duchamp's short stories have been published in *Full Spectrum 4*, *Pulphouse*, *Starshore*, *The Women Who Walk Through Fire*, and *Memories and Visions*, and she has a story forthcoming in *F&SF*. "Things of the Flesh" is her first tale for *Asimov's*.

A word of warning:
The following powerful
tale has a few scenes
which may be disturbing
to some readers.

art: Laurie Harden





Murder Rate Surges in Rural Louisiana

LAFAYETTE, LA. April 9 (AP)—The sheriff of St. Martin Parish, Bobby Dugas, today issued a special appeal to the citizens of his parish to remain calm in the aftermath of an unprecedented incidence of murder. He confirmed that eight persons have been murdered in four separate incidents over the last twenty-four hours, and said that there was no evidence indicating that any of the incidents were related, though an investigation was being undertaken to explore the possibility. St. Martin Parish averages less than one murder per year.

In a related statement, Father Dalton, a priest of St. Martin of Tours in St. Martinville, announced a special mass for the community, to be held at 7 P.M.

More Killings in Acadiana

NEW IBERIA, LA. April 10 (INTERNET NEWS SERVICE)—Nine new murders and a suicide following one of them were reported for St. Martin Parish today by Sheriff Bobby Dugas. These slayings bring the total number of fatalities to eighteen for the last forty-eight hours. Fourteen of the deaths were caused by gunshot wounds, and one by stabbing. Six additional people were injured, and have been hospitalized. A spokesperson for Lafayette General Hospital reported they were in satisfactory condition. Each incident appears to have been motivated by sexual jealousy, triggered when the individual suspects discovered their partners in flagrante delicto. All of the suspects are men, and two of them sheriff's deputies.

An official of the sheriff's office, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said that a bizarre pattern in the cases has emerged. In three of the shooting incidents the suspects have independently reported the same scenario: arriving home to discover his partner sexually engaged with a neighbor, relative, or coworker, and then finding himself ignored by the engaged couple.

In addition, several persons have reportedly been detained for indecent public behavior, and two on charges of rape and battery. There has been a great public outcry in St. Martinville and other towns in the parish. Ms. Diane Fournette of Cade remarked on KSTM's call-in show *Town Chat*, "Mais me, I don't understand what's wrong with these people. All anyone thinks about anymore is sex. It is a judgment on us, surely. I tell y'all, God's fed up with it. Father Dalton is right, yeah. It's time we cleaned up our act. Adultery's a sin. And God does take it seriously."

Local churches have begun around-the-clock vigils, both to pray for the dead and to "cleanse our hearts of filth," as Father Dalton put it.

SEXUAL MANIA IN LOUISIANA? THE "SEX PLAGUE" SPREADS

by Sheila Robertson

Special to the Times

LAFAYETTE, LA. April 12—When Jeanne Thibodeaux failed to show up for work on the morning of April 6, her boss, Marcel Bienvenue, the principal of St. Martin High School in St. Martinville, Louisiana, telephoned her several times

through the day. He said he left nearly a half-dozen messages on her answering machine. But his calls were never returned. Ms. Thibodeaux's colleagues say this was not characteristic of the fifty-five-year-old woman who had taught Biology I for thirteen years at St. Martin High School. Concerned that Ms. Thibodeaux may have suffered an accident in her home, at around 3:30 that afternoon Mr. Bienvenue drove to Ms. Thibodeaux's house in the neighboring town of Broussard. He pounded on both the front and back doors, and called the teacher's name repeatedly, but without response. Alarmed, he went around the house, peering in through every window at eye level. He said he feared she might be lying on the floor, unconscious.

In his statement to the Louisiana State Police yesterday, Mr. Bienvenue said that he "saw her lying on her back, in bed, on top of the sheets, holding a vibrator between her legs. You can imagine how that outraged me. Having such a thing in the first place. And staying home to do it not only on a school day, but on Good Friday! This is not what you expect from a woman you've known for years, as I have Jeanne Thibodeaux. I have to say I was too embarrassed to do anything about it right at that moment, and so I left."

Yesterday Ms. Thibodeaux was found dead in her home, lying naked on the top of the sheets, in the same position Mr. Bienvenue described in his statement to the police. The vibrator was still switched on, but its batteries had gone dead. Her brother, Frederick "Laughing Boy" Thibodeaux of Breaux Bridge, who had come to investigate why his sister hadn't been answering her phone or returning family calls, discovered the body. The Lafayette Parish Coroner's Office has reported the cause of Thibodeaux's death as dehydration.

Several apparently similar incidents involving couples have been widely reported in both St. Martin and Lafayette parishes. For instance, just two doors down from Jeanne Thibodeaux, Michelle and Cyrus Signorelli were found dead in bed together. A number of couples have been hospitalized after having been discovered by relatives to be copulating without ceasing (usually called to the scene by the couple's child). And the incidents of murder and rape have continued to climb. The latest figures provided by the St. Martin Parish Sheriff's Office includes 39 murders, 6 suicides, and 27 rapes. (See related articles on A12, A13, and A15.)

Deposition of Michael Jaspers, M.D., Dept. of Psychiatry, Oschner Foundation, Metairie, Louisiana. (April 16.)

My name is Dr. Michael Jaspers. I am a practicing psychiatrist, based chiefly in New Orleans, at Oschner. I also work on contract for the parish of Lafayette, providing services for the parish's mental health program. Usually this entails perhaps four or five days a month of my time. Last Tuesday (April 10), Dr. Salvatore Rainey, the parish's Public Health Officer, requested my immediate assistance with an apparent outbreak of mass mental disturbance. I had of course seen some of the New Orleans

stations' sensationalist coverage of the assaults and murders in St. Martinville, Breau Bridge and Cade, but had assumed that local tensions, whipped up perhaps by the clergy—for people are very passionately and imaginatively religious in those parts of the state (and indeed in *many* parts of this state, whatever their religious preferences may be)—were responsible. And, of course, it being around Easter, one expects excessively religious people to have the tendency toward even greater excitability than ordinary. (I understand that some Catholics in the southwest part of the state actually perform fasts, particularly during Holy Week.)

The situation with which Dr. Rainey faced me was vexed, to say the least. In the first place, few of the patients involved had supplemental insurance, and therefore lacked coverage for psychiatric care. Which of course placed the parish—and ultimately the state—in a bind. The received wisdom is that it is Louisiana's low rate of taxation that has attracted so much biogenetic industry here—as well as cheap labor costs, the laxness of regulation, and the absence of a strong NIMBY sentiment. The state simply has no contingency fund for dealing with public health emergencies. And so Dr. Rainey had a difficult time persuading the Governor's chief budget official to agree to underwrite the cost of admitting an unknown number of patients to psychiatric care. Finally Dr. Rainey suggested that given the amount of national media attention Louisiana was attracting because of the murders that would probably be found to be related, it would do the state considerable damage were it to get out that people so critically ill were being chained up in jail cells, and left to die. (That was, as I will explain shortly, the only alternative to hospitalization, barring the sanctioning of the threat to public safety which leaving them uninterned would in some cases most certainly pose.) Faced with the specter of a public relations catastrophe, the governor capitulated to the extent of allowing the hospitalizations—with the caveat that the state would pay for no tests, and only the most absolutely essential of medication and treatment. In short, we were put on notice that we would be required to justify rigorously every penny spent on these uninsured cases.

The consequence, of course, is that neither myself nor Drs. Jefferson or Boudreaux are even close to being able to offer a diagnosis for these cases of mental disturbance. What I can offer is a generalized description of the symptoms that appear to be common to both males and females stricken with the disease. A fairly typical case is that of Ms. Celia Willis of St. Martinville. Ms. Willis is forty-five, white, married, and biparous. She has been attended faithfully since her admission by shifts of neighbors and relatives, determined to bear her constant support through her ordeal. (Her husband is so upset with her behavior that he will not visit her.) Ms. Willis was admitted at about one P.M. on Thursday, April 12,

when she was brought to Lafayette General's emergency room by Lafayette municipal police officers. As you can read in Ms. Willis's chart, they reported to the admitting physician that they had been called to the Evangeline Motel by the management. The cleaning staff had found her in bed, rubbing the room key over her genitals. And having just the night before learned Jeanne Thibodeaux's terrible story, the motel staff and management decided this must be a similar case. From what we were able to piece together from the physical evidence, the motel's register and the desk clerk's statement, Ms. Willis checked in with a man the previous afternoon. The police have since tracked his license number and interviewed him. He is twenty-six, black, and drives a delivery truck for Pepsico. (I have persuaded the police not to disclose his real name either to the press or to Ms. Willis's husband. Mr. Willis is extremely angry. And in view of the shootings we have already seen, it would be wise to remember that in this part of the country most white men still consider sex between black men and white women an affront to their manhood.) He says she picked him up outside a bakery near the USL campus, where he went to purchase a roll on which to eat the boudin he had bought at the convenience store in the same strip mall. (Ms. Willis's neighbors say she often drove into Lafayette specifically to go to that bakery. The police say her car was towed from the bakery's lot, which tends to confirm his account.) He said she came onto him in a very strong way, and invited him to have a drink with her. But as they were driving to a bar, she suddenly "started coming on real, real strong, almost like she was crazy. I mean she was all over me, and like I could hardly drive, the lady was into my pants and rubbing her own crotch, too, you know?" He said her aggressiveness scared him a little, but also excited him. (He said that at first he felt like he "was in a movie.") And so they went straight to the motel. The problem was, though, that she not only wanted to keep on having sex, but was "into another reality. Like she didn't hear a word I said to her. Wouldn't let me get out of bed. Didn't even want to let me up to take a piss. Kept sticking my hand between her legs. Man, I finally had to get out of there. She was, like, a sexual vampire, you know? And *greedy!* Man! You hear about some of these babes with their multiple orgasms. Me, I never believed that stuff myself. But with *her!* She was like a fucking machine, man! Yeah, coming and coming and coming and her whole body like something out of a slime pit. It really got to be *gross*, you know?"

The ER staff put her in restraints, since when the police removed the handcuffs she immediately opened the raincoat they'd draped and buttoned around her and started rubbing herself. I myself first examined her at around three that afternoon. She showed marked physical signs of sexual arousal: blood pressure consistently measured at around

220/100, flushed skin, accelerated pulse, distended bladder (from failure to micturate), myotonia, enlarged labia, vasocongestion with abundant accompanying secretion, erect clitoris and nipples, dilated pupils, and rapid, shallow respiration. She was perspiring profusely. (Her hair, and the hospital gown she had been put into only half an hour earlier, were thoroughly soaked.) Though I repeatedly spoke her name, I was unable to attract her attention. If it hadn't been for the symptoms of extreme sexual arousal, I might have thought, at first sight, her catatonic. And though, being under restraint, she had no source of physical stimulation, she intermittently manifested, very visibly, the spasms of orgasm.

Since I had very little to go on at that point, I ordered that a general neuroleptic and antispasmodic be administered intravenously, as well as a saline and electrolyte drip for replenishing the fluid it was obvious she had been losing. When her relatives arrived on the scene, I spoke with her mother and older sister, to try to persuade them to pay for some testing. A Victorian view of mental illness and morality proved a problem. When I asserted that I was certain Ms. Willis' illness had a physiological basis, they leaped to the conclusion I meant she must have a neoplasm (which seems to be the only neurological cause of aberrant behavior lay persons are able to understand). When I said that though we hadn't ruled that out, that I thought it likely there was another cause underlying her aberrant behavior, they only shook their heads and said in despair that what was the point, clearly "poor Celia" had "gone insane." They made it clear they assumed the illness must be either hereditary, or a sign that something had "gone terribly, terribly wrong" in Ms. Willis's marriage, and that the situation was irremediable.

In the end, they agreed to pay for some blood work, and a CT-scan. (I failed to persuade them to agree to EEG, MRI, PET-scan or BEAM.) As I suspected, the blood work showed an abnormally high level of testosterone in Ms. Willis's blood. Obviously the Sixty-four Dollar Question is *why* it is so abnormally high. Both the St. Martin Parish Coroner's Office and the Lafayette Parish Coroner's Office have reported adrenal exhaustion in several of the corpses of the murder victims, as well as in Ms. Thibodeaux. The adrenal glands, as well as the testes in men and the ovaries in women, produce testosterone. Again, the question must be *why* the overproduction. One may speculate, but that is not my place in this case. A neurologist specializing in endocrine functions would be far better able to address the question.

Virtually the same symptoms have appeared in every other case. (In the case of males, a constant erection is maintained.) The neuroleptic and antispasmodic we have been administering has shown no signs of easing the symptoms. When the dosage is increased, the patient drifts in and out of consciousness. And as far as we can tell (without, that is,

doing an EEG or BEAM), none of the patients has achieved REM sleep since admission. That being the case, even with intravenous introduction of replacement fluids, I consider the prognosis for their recovery (and perhaps even their survival) to be poor.

As for the epidemiology of the illness, I believe Dr. Rainey has concerned himself with that side of the problem.

Excerpts from the Personal Journal of Laurel di Sforza, M.D., of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Washington, State of Columbia, office):

10:24 P.M., Friday, 20 April

Grrrrrr. Max is *furious* that I've accepted the field assignment without first "discussing" it with him. As though one can refuse such assignments without blighting one's career! Max: "Who said anything about your refusing? I only said we should have discussed it before you accepted it." Theoretically, that's correct. BUT!!! Consider. According to his office, he was in meetings all day, with some NIH high muckety-muck. And so he wasn't available for discussion. And Atlanta said they had to have a definite answer by four sharp. (And it's not as though Max doesn't buzz off here or there on professional missions, without clearing them with me first. Of course he doesn't! He *informs* me in advance. But do we really *discuss* whether or not he should make such trips? No! We do not!) Max: "But it's not the same, Laurel. This is like accepting a *job*. You don't know how long this assignment's going to last. This sex-mania plague, as the media so sensationally call it, is brand new. For all we know you could end up assigned to it permanently." And when I pointed out that it was more likely they'd be setting up a new section for it before that happened, he demanded of me whether I could give him an upper bound on the limits of the assignment.

The truth is, he's possibly just now realizing how damned much of the responsibility I take for child-care. That dawned on me only when he began lecturing me on how Bettina would suffer from my prolonged absence. What, does he think I like being away from her? This is a special assignment, a special case. He doesn't see that. But I just know that if the roles were reversed he'd be expecting me to applaud the opportunity, and the implied promotion (besides the extra pay and perks we'll be getting out of it). Shit. I could just scream, it makes me so irritable. (But then I'm irritable anyway—goddam menstrual cramps and my skin all itchy and muscles aching here and there, not to mention the usual swelling in my throat and gums. Every damned month, like clockwork. For how many years now? I suppose we should be glad the guys don't have to put up with it. Then we'd have a special dose of their irrationality

every fucking month on the button. If only the chemical suppressant weren't still throwing off so many side-effects. . . .)

Actually, I'm feeling just a tiny bit miffed at the role I'm being given on this action team. It is an implied promotion, no question. But I'd rather be on the investigative side, like that last time. Julius, on the phone, said I was "just too wonderful" in handling the media during the mutated viral meningitis crisis. What I suspect he means is that my Beltway connections are wanted. I'm sure it's escaped no one who knows me that my old med school housemate is now Sec of DHHS. And of course, after these last few years working with Congressional committees, I know something about politics. And from the little I've learned about the problem so far, it's clear it's going to be a political hot potato all around.

A communicable mental disease? (If it *is* communicable, that is.) Can't imagine anything more likely to start a panic, short of a recurrence of a mutated bubonic plague. And then the bizarre character of it—the Great White Moralizers are already at it with their Hellfire and Brimstone this-is-the-end-of-society garbage. God raining down punishment. And Judgment Day coming, coming, coming soon to a neighborhood near you.

Well, must pack. I want the little bit of time I have in the morning for going more thoroughly through the file Julius faxed me. (And no doubt an update will arrive in the morning, just as I'm about to leave—reading matter for the trip, as the cover-note will undoubtedly say. Yes indeed: I remember Julius's little ways quite well.)

A few minutes before midnight—Central Standard Time, 21 April—New Orleans—

Notice how picky I start getting when I'm around Julius—and that after only a few hours of listening to his precise, overly-qualified speech. (Fine for writing papers, but sometimes it's a struggle to listen to. Though as I recall, one does get used to it.) My irritability seems to have followed me from SC—could barely keep from acidic comment every time he extended his "war" metaphor. Yes, yes, he's the General. Dee is his ADC. Blaine is intelligence, of course. And I'm the combination press-liaison, protocol chief, and Quartermaster. Oh lovely, lovely. Can you handle all three functions, Laurel? he wanted to know. Then made an observation on how Atlanta was sending me a public relations specialist and an administrative assistant with expertise in public health. La, la. Well then why not simply appoint the PR person to take care of the media, and the admin assistant to make sure everything goes smoothly with local officials out here in the provinces? (Which wouldn't leave me with much officially—but I'd be happy to work under Blaine, doing the hard-core stuff.) But of course, though he didn't say it explicitly, the

reason is the DHHS connection. Yes, yes. And never mind that Whitney's politics were never even remotely close to mine. We've maintained a cool, though not intimate, contact through the years, which counts.

The factor Julius *did* mention almost made me laugh hysterically. "You must be comfortable in New Orleans, having done the first two years of your undergraduate work at Tulane." Oh boy. And hated it so much I got out as quickly as I could, running all the way to Berkeley. "Comfortable" in New Orleans? Lovely weather. (Well, it's April, so it's not bad. And the mimosa is lovely. But give it a month, and if we're still here it will be *hell*, and getting worse.) Tulane? Bad memories. Faculty all right, as far as I can recall. ("Almost twenty years ago, Julius. Barely remember the place. And as in all cities, there have been changes.") Tulane was (probably still is) a party school. Full of rich little punks from up North, unable to make the cut in the Ivy League schools, liking the idea of constant debauchery, Mardi Gras for a good part of the school year, and hanging out with other rich brats. Why the hell I ever chose to go there beats me. (Something, I so hazily recall, to do with a boy in my senior class. . . .)

Well the first thing I did today (after reading every report and news clipping available on X), was work out safety protocol with J. Since we haven't a clue as to how it's being transmitted (or even if it is), he wants to be super-cautious. Rule number one: drink only bottled water, and eat only microwaved frozen foods. (Which will become mighty tedious, fast.) Safe sex, of course. Wear gloves and masks around patients known to be stricken. (The guy in charge of most of the patients in Lafayette has already implemented this one—a good sign we'll have at least some good local help with X.) And log every bit of in-person contact we make. (Just in case.)

The second thing I did was start thinking about what the hell I'm going to do when the media discover the discrete outbreaks outside the focal area. When they get wind of our being in on X, they'll probably suspect there have been other cases. The question is: should we take the initiative, on the presumption that if we release the info ourselves we'll have better control over how the media handle it, or should we brace ourselves for discovery and exposure. I tend to go with the latter, since it seems to me that it won't matter how the media come to know. The thing is just so explosive that the bare fact that there have been cases in Missouri, Illinois, Texas, New Mexico and California will be enough to create the biggest media circus of the twenty-first century.

(Hey, J., you didn't think I really wanted to be the ringmaster of a circus, did you?)

Of course there is the point that once the news gets out, more new cases will be reported, that are being missed now. There is that. And god

knows if anything is going to give us a lead on vectors of transmission and source, it will be these oddball cases. Blaine's assigned a few members of his team to start following them up—to try to find out if any of them knew one another, and if not, what the possible points of contact might be.

Well, to bed. Tomorrow we're driving to Lafayette. I suppose we'll see how well I did on the phone today, doing my liaison bit. My two assistants don't arrive until Monday. So am hoping—thinly—the media won't find out we're on the job until then.

11 P.M., Sunday, April 22—Lafayette—

Exhausted. We were up this morning at five, to make an early start for the boonies. But must jot a few notes down, or I'll end up with an incomplete personal account of the assignment (as happened the last time). Must be *disciplined* about it.

First things first: we were met, on arrival, with the news of the first death of an X-afflicted patient under hospitalized care. It's sobering, of course, and changes everything. We all know this death is just the beginning, and a reminder of how we're not talking numbers, but lives. The patient was sixty-three, had manifested symptoms for five days, and was diabetic (which created complications almost at once). He suffered a myocardial infarction at four this morning, flatlined, was revived, zoomed into tachycardia, then collapsed in final cardiac arrest. Not surprising, when you think of the stress his body (and particularly heart) was under. But the conclusion we have to draw is inescapable: even if X patients are saved from dehydration, the stress will kill them eventually.

The situation so politically and socially complicated. More on that shortly, but first—the death changed something else: the governor has thrown us to the media, like a piece of meat intended to placate their bloodlust. It seems that once news of the MI got out, scores of media teams swarmed into Baton Rouge, to besiege the governor and to cover the delegation from New Iberia—all friends and relatives of Daniel Bernard (the deceased MI)—descending on the governor to demand what exactly he intends to do to prevent the deaths of the increasing numbers of people stricken by X. (Fast organizing, one would say in more sophisticated surroundings. But I gather the charge to the governor's mansion was more in the way of a concerted outburst of rage than a politically organized piece of activism.) And so the governor announced: "The CDC is in charge." Unaware of the team's whereabouts, the media then made a mad rush on Atlanta. All of which puts me on notice that I'll be having to hold a briefing sooner than I'd like. I've asked Atlanta to make some charts displaying some of the complicated relationships obtaining between the brain and the important glands involved (adrenals, thyroid,

testes). . . . But the problem is that we can't really say anything in particular about X, beyond our knowledge that abnormal testosterone and thyroid production are the major physiological problems it causes. We can't tell them, for instance, that Julius is hypothesizing a probable overproduction of certain neurohormones . . . since it is only a hypothesis, with no lab work yet to back it up. What we need is a report from Atlanta on the samples taken from the autopsies so far performed. (We have a pathology crew flying in tonight, to be in on this next one.) Imagine the panic, if we implied to the public that there is some unknown agent abroad, of unknown communicability, able to stimulate harmful levels of neurotransmitters. . . . Such unanchored speculation, especially vis-à-vis brain function, would assuredly freak people out. After all, this society generally refuses any rational discussion of the physical workings of such common disorders as epilepsy, schizophrenia or manic-depression. People prefer to think of these diseases as divorced from the body (though hopefully "hereditary"), because if they thought of them as physical illnesses they'd start thinking that anyone could get them, and not just "disturbed" or "crazy" people.

No, just go on keeping mind and body separate! As though they were only tenuously related! As though they weren't the same damned thing!

Hah. Obviously I'm full of Michael Jaspers's insightful discussion of the problem. His frustration with this common misperception seems to be the bane of his existence. Such an acute, careful man. (I didn't know they made psychiatrists like him.) It seems that the turning point in his battle for treating his X patients was getting their cause of hospitalization officially changed to the category of "endocrine disorder." (Previously, it was "psychiatric.") By doing that, he was able to call in the hospital's sole endocrinologist as a consultant on the cases. A stroke of genius, on his part. And appropriate, too, since until we have an idea of what is causing the overproduction of testosterone, adrenaline and thyroxine, the best we can do is to find a way to suppress production. (Not that the endocrinologist, Dr. Sovinsky, has succeeded in doing so yet, but he's working on it.)

I'm wandering all over the place here. (But then disorganization is par for the course when I'm this tired.) But to proceed: early this morning, the five of us piled into the van, all sticky with the humidity, the locally pervasive smell of rot thick and damp in our noses. First part of the drive flat, flat, flat, but with lots of slimy green water bordering the roadside. Then, after Baton Rouge, we were treated to a bizarre drive on a divided highway bucking like a roller coaster built over swamp. (Didn't know there were still places so sparsely populated, outside of the drought-stricken West.) We pulled into Lafayette at seven-thirty. Place was like something out of the last century—all residential neighborhoods dotted

with strip malls, trashy business drags and a few big indoor malls. Only restaurants and churches showing any signs of life. No thriving city center. Cars everywhere (it being, of course, one of those old-fashioned mall cultures, with very little and highly inconvenient public transportation available). Quaint, right. A few people on the streets (in cars), presumably out attending religious services. We had breakfast with Michael and his boss, one Sal Rainey, in the staff lounge (following our safety protocol to the socially embarrassing letter). Then we made rounds of the patients stricken with X.

I don't know what exactly I expected, but . . . well, it wasn't pretty. All the patients are being kept in restraints, in the isolation wing (which is usually for TB patients). During rounds the visitors were driven out into the elevator lobby, beyond the isolation security entrance. They were my first sight, before the patients. And a more confused, hopeless crowd of people I hope never again to see. Inside, space was tight, so they had too many beds jammed in together. Like casualties in a war zone, I suppose. Blank, sweaty faces flushed hectic red, mouths open, hoarsely panting for breath, some of them with eyeballs rolled up in their heads. All of them hooked up to EKG monitors and IVs. Two of them (each with a history of bronchitis) on respirators, and three others receiving supplemental oxygen. The stench of genital odors in the female wards was overpowering. (The males all had ice packs on their testes, and catheters, preventing erections, in their penises. And so smelled only of a very strong bacteria in their sweat.) As luck would have it, while we were there a patient (female, white, seventy years old) suffered an aneurysm. (And didn't make it.) What I found most disturbing was the patients' obvious lack of awareness of medical staff or even one another. Although in every case they responded reflexively to physical stimuli, they made no response to voice or visual inputs. Michael believes this is not due to neurological damage, but to "lack of interest" (as he calls it) in anything outside their sexual sensations.

While I was there I kept wondering about that window that apparently opens between the time patients begin focusing on sexual gratification and when they switch off entirely. Michael's deposition describing the onset of Celia Willis's sexual fugue (a term that Michael uses to describe the state of the X patients' not being present to the world) gives us a fairly close look at that window. At the bakery she was in touch enough to make contact with a possible sexual partner, but shortly thereafter was barely together enough to get him to the motel. (We'll probably never know whether she ever intended to have a drink with him first.) And then, very rapidly, she began to lose control. So that by the time her partner left, she was too far gone to think of finding a replacement, and so resorted, simply, to masturbation.

It seems obvious that in the cases in which couples, the members of which are both stricken, are found in bed together in sexual fugue, they somehow remain aware enough of one another's bodies to be able to continue sexual activity, though without any more awareness of other sorts of inputs than any other of the patients in sexual fugue. Which horrifies me, somehow, more than the thought of so many people being found alone, masturbating unceasingly. (Or even more than the few cases of men reacting with sexual aggression: a kind of solipsistic violence that is in other contexts quite commonplace.) I imagine these couples, both their members stricken with X, fortuitously together at the onset of the sexual fugue, in that brief window, fucking without real awareness of what they're doing, like machines programmed to do an action until the power runs out. Fucking themselves to death.

Creepy. But that's the scandal of it, that's so titillating to the media. (And *frightening*.) Of course so far the media believe its occurrence has been limited to this small backwoods area of a strange, traditionally odd state. . . .

I was tempted when I sat after dinner with Michael Jaspers to tell him there have been out-of-state occurrences. But I've learned my lesson well, and know better than to babble out indiscretions in the warmth of personal conversation with someone so trustworthy as Michael seems to be. Instead, I asked him to fill me in on the politics of the situation here. And I encouraged him to talk about his distress at being forced to take a temporary leave from Oschner until the crisis here has passed. Not only does he have a family in New Orleans (and his mate, he says, is none too pleased to be taking up his share of parenting duties while he's away), but since Oschner pays him considerably more than Lafayette Parish does for his services, his income, while he's here, will suffer.

I suppose the worst aspect of his situation is the constant struggle he is forced to mount against racist attitudes and effects here. Most of the X patients are white (a curious, and perhaps significant factor, since the local population is roughly half white and half black). And the symptoms of X imbue the patients' families and friends with shame and embarrassment. And so they react with marked hostility to this doctor who happens to be black and in charge of their loved one's case. But until DHHS puts X on the list of diseases covered by federal insurance, they're stuck with whatever doctor their public health officer assigns them to. (Unless, of course, they want to cover the costs out of their own pocket—something few people around here *can* do, even those working for the biotech companies clustered around Baton Rouge and Lafayette.)

There's a lot of rage in the friends and relatives of patients afflicted with X, Michael says. Rage at the patients for their "immorality," rage at the medical establishment for not knowing how to cure (much less

save) the patients, rage at their own sense of powerlessness, and rage at their neighbors, whom they suspect of sneering at them behind their backs, and whom they know pity them deeply.

But now sleep. It's back to New Orleans in the morning—and lots of work, preparing for our first big press conference on X.

9:40 P.M., Monday, 23 April—New Orleans

I feel as though I've wandered into Never-never Land. Or Through The Looking-Glass. My awareness of X has become intense, in the way that a catastrophic illness or accident in one's family becomes inescapable and all-prevailing. While at the same time I've been injected into an intrinsically bizarre and alienating landscape of occasional ostentatious wealth posed side by side with wretched poverty in a traditional culture seething with anachronism. (One feels one might have been transported to Central America, without notice—only everyone speaks English—of sorts—here.) According to Michael Jaspers, Pepsi and boudin (a Cajun spicy, rice-laden sausage) is the "classic" combination for lunch, and to my mind is a sort of emblem of the place. You only find Pepsi these days in the backwaters (including Third World countries); while boudin is a traditional food, strictly local. As in most places, food and religion are the bulwarks of tradition here. (I generally find "tradition" glaring in its sexist and racist vectors. But isn't that the case with ethnicity generally?) With the exception of outsiders like Sal Rainey and Michael Jaspers (who hail from New Jersey and Florida respectively), every person I've met down here has made comments on my name, pegging me as an "Italian." As though one's forebear on one side of the family four generations back is enough to characterize who one is! It boggles the mind. And then I imagine the time of it Max would have here—having been born and raised in New Zealand, but with the name MacFarlane pegging him, I suppose, as *Scottish*! Just imagine the queries: "Is your mate a *dour* man, ma'am? And penny-pinching, I'm sure."

Which is not to say that the people I've met in Lafayette aren't culturally distinct. I feel a difference, yes, but I couldn't begin to say what it is. Their grammar is a little different, particularly in their use of verbs and odd prepositional phrases (most strikingly in the way they use few possessive pronouns in favor of "for so-and-so"—as in "for y'all" instead of saying *yours*, or "for him" instead of saying *his*). They're all underpaid in that hospital, and overworked. They banter and tease one another in an open, lively way, and use a lot of nicknames and nonstandard forms of address. They move slowly. And they're amiable, not at all hostile to or suspicious of "Yankees" (as Michael tells me they call the lot of us). (Not that Blaine is from the North—but apparently anybody north of a certain town in Louisiana is called a "Yankee." Partly a joke, I suspect,

and partly the sense that anyone not of the culture is difficult to read, which is what, by connotative definition, "Yankee" probably means.)

Though we had planned to leave early this morning, we didn't make it onto the road until about two this afternoon. (I arrived back in the office just in time to meet my new assistants.) But we delayed in the first instance because Blaine and Julius wanted to talk to the pathology crew (who arrived late yesterday afternoon), and then because of the uproar caused by the admission of a pregnant woman with X. What to do about it? Michael and his colleagues are in a real quandary. The assumption is that if the mother is afflicted, the fetus probably is, too. Second, in the early months especially (she's in the first trimester) hormonal inputs are significant, and obviously with the mother's hormones haywire all bets are off. Third, whether or how to medicate her. Giving her a strong dose of a neuroleptic could do serious neurological damage to the fetus. But without a neuroleptic and antispasmodic she'll be in a state of nearly continual orgasm, which is to say, highly stressed. Also, there's another complication: the gynecologist Michael called in has detected uterine contractions.

Well, probably she'll miscarry. But family members are frantic to save the fetus. (They're furious with the mother, and the husband's mother has actually accused her of irresponsible misconduct, and says she's going to get a lawyer to take control of the case, so that the "appropriate decisions" can be made for the baby's welfare.) I can hardly wait to see the media circus this case will attract. (Though maybe it will sober up the jerks who think the idea of a seventy-year-old woman caught up in sexual fugue is the most hilarious thing they've ever heard of. God, I hate journalists.)

An added point: Ms. Olivier (the pregnant woman) is the neighbor of Jeanne Thibodeaux on the one side, and Michelle and Cyrus Signorelli on the other. All three of these people were early victims of X, undiscovered until after their deaths. Blaine is focusing on the proximity of these cases, sifting them for common factors. He still doesn't think it's airborne, since there have been several singletons (so far). Though of course it could be that certain people have a natural immunity to X. . . .

Spoke to Max and Bettina tonight, briefly, after dinner. Max is pissed-off because I still can't tell him whether I'll be home next month when he's off to a conference in Tokyo. Just arrange for the contingency that I won't be back yet, I told him. (Which made him even more pissed-off.) He thinks I should always have to be the one to arrange for special child-care—since it's my fault when I won't be home (though never his fault when he won't be). Invite your mother for a visit to the States, I suggested, only half-joking. My mother has her own life! he snapped back. She's not some bloody convenience you can summon to suit your own!

You can't drink the water from the tap here, but at least there's plenty for bathing. (Most places, you can drink the water but can't get enough to bathe with any comfort.) And so I'm going to indulge in a long hot soak and scrub. And with a glass of wine, too. I'm just that tiniest bit tense.

11:35 P.M., Friday, 27 April—Lafayette

Held our first formal press conference this morning, in an auditorium on the USL campus. A rinky-dink kind of college, but full of grand old live oaks and stately magnolias—in bloom, sweetening the pervasive scent of rot that fills not only the outdoors, but ordinarily smelly places like hospitals as well. (I have a distinct memory, lately much revived, of a wall in my apartment near Tulane growing mildew one Christmas vacation, mildew which then attacked the tweed jacket I had hanging on a hook on the back of my bedroom door.) Bacteria here have evidently found paradise. No matter that there's a lot of hot sun and UV radiation: the humidity gives them an edge even against sunlight.

Actually, it was a rather pleasant spring day—if one doesn't mind temperatures in the low eighties and ninety-three percent humidity. But there was that exotic-seeming flat shrill birdsong I associate with New Orleans and a bit of a breeze stirring in the live oaks, creating the illusion of mildness. We debated, at some length, where to hold the press conference—Atlanta, Washington, New Orleans, or here. The importance of maintaining the association of the locale with the outbreak of X finally outweighed every other consideration. At this point, the general public and media all think of X as a rather bizarre disease locally produced that will be—like most of our viral menaces—nipped quickly in the bud, before it becomes more widely threatening. We debated also whether we should allow the media to continue making the comfortable assumption that infectious diseases can be easily solved before becoming major public health problems. Julius doesn't think X will be an easy nut to crack. The lab work has so far netted nothing specific. No microbes cultured, and no abnormal concentrations of a protein or amino acid that might be involved in switching on a neurotransmitter found in the patients' blood, cerebrospinal fluid, or tissues. Of course, it's early yet. But the public's perception of the magic of nanotechnology, by which so many viruses can be effectively vanquished, may be inappropriate here: so Julius warns. "Is it a virus, Dr. di Sforza?" the journalists kept asking after I'd finished the formal presentation. But apart from saying we had not yet detected the agent causing the hormonal dysfunctions, I avoided the negative.

Needless to say, after hearing my presentation a number of journalists complained that rather than being briefed, they were being subjected to

an introductory sexual physiology lecture. Which they were, of course. I do believe the tack we must take now is to prepare the public to understand the disease in less moralistic terms. I shudder to think of the consequences if we don't. Already the fundamentalist preachers are claiming that "God is sick and tired of pornographers, adulterers, fornicators, abortionists, homosexuals, and other perverts. These grotesque fits of bestiality show us just how filthy and loathsome are all sexual thoughts, words, and acts. Those who traffic in Satan's ways have become like animals, degrading the human species. The message is clear: God wants us to clean up our act!"

As I was making the presentation with my wonderful audiovisual materials (particularly all those superb graphics Lorrie put together for us), I every now and then would flash on the state of my own sexuality. It really is like clockwork, that the week after I've finished my period I get mightily horny. (And now feel a little too self-conscious to masturbate, after having read so many case studies in which X victims could do nothing else.) I know people don't like to face up to the fact that sexuality isn't strictly a matter of personal will, intention, and morality. They like to think their mind or soul lords it over their bodies (always, always, making that division, as though it weren't an artifact of our language but enscribed in our biology). It makes them feel uneasy, powerless even, to think that various chemicals washing through their bodies in relationships they are totally unaware of have anything to do with their wants, desires, impulses. As though it demeans them. And it's here that I fear the attraction of the fundamentalist approach will find a weakness it can exploit. Who wants to admit that their conscious will isn't fully in charge of physiological processes that impact not only on their personal psychical economy, but their social relations?

We like to think we can push a button to turn off everything we mark "sex," that we can push a button to turn it on, that it's all a matter of *will*. To a certain extent it can be. But who really knows how accidental it all is? Hormones, pheromones, neurotransmitters, enzymes. . . . All going busily at it, regardless of what we say we want.

And so of course the fundamentalist who understands this will say, "The body is the enemy. The flesh belongs to Satan. We've been telling you all along. You're just proving the point with Science." Which only begs the question. Though you can take the mind out of the body, you can't take the body out of the mind, since the mind is merely a part of the body. Will they say that X's victims have been possessed by their own flesh—by the devil, whom they've lost the war against?

How grotesquely absurd, how *perverse*: imagining ourselves at war with ourselves.

* * *

7:15 P.M., Sunday, 29 April

Can a committed sexual relationship survive the stress of child-raising? Stay tuned, folks. Because it ain't at all clear to me.

Just had a nasty phone-fight with Max. And as usual his damned put-on cool about drove me up the wall. (Exactly what I find attractive in him is what most riles me when we're caught up in antagonism. Naturelmente.) He was in the wrong, yet had the gall to act as though he held the high road. For starters, when I talked to him and Bettina earlier today, not a word about what he was up to. He was cold, of course, only just civil. But then not three hours later I get a call from Jane, quite righteously vexed at Max's attempt to pull one of his unilateral moves (that usually work with me and many of his subordinates, which is probably the reason he even thought he could get away with it). When we made the bplex arrangement with Jane and Renee, the understanding was that we would pool our child-care resources—sharing sitters, and trading off sitting duties from time to time, always keeping records of who has done what precisely so that no one would be taken advantage of. Which has worked splendidly—until now. It seems Max got the bright idea that he could get Jane and Renee to keep Bettina on their side of the bplex in the evenings, while he was away. (And naturally ferry her back and forth to day-care, with Jael, something that usually gets split between the two sides.) After all, we share kitchen facilities, and often trade off shopping and cooking. It wouldn't be that much more work, Max claims. And we would make up the difference to Jane and Renee. "It's not like we're trying to cheat them!"

He missed the point entirely. He couldn't see what "the ladies" were so worked-up about. How *unreasonable* of them!

Grrr. A child is not like a cat, I said. Or even a dog. Damn the man, he just assumed they'd say yes! He didn't see it as anything special. Just "a little more baby-sitting than usual."

So of course he then blows up at me, dropping back into his déclassé down-under accent (forgetting all his nice Oxford vowels) without even noticing it, telling me that I signed a contract agreeing to certain responsibilities in raising the child (the same contract he signed!), and that clearly I was putting other things above the child's welfare.

I told him to skip the conference, since it was clearly his turn to make the "career sacrifice." And then I hung up. (Which he HATES. Like my leaving the room while he's lecturing me about some verbal indiscretion or other I made at a dinner party.) Why is it that he thinks it's my responsibility, and not his, too? After all, I was the one who took the three-month leave after Bettina's birth, to stay home with her and breast-feed her. ("Well, I could hardly have breast-fed her myself, darling, could I?" No, dear. And no one asked you to. Only to remember that I damaged my career with that leave.)

The phone's chirping, damn it. And I haven't even started on a summary of the last week. And it's probably Max, and another round. . . .

7:30 P.M.

Well, it wasn't Max, but Michael. It seems he's just seen (and taped, the angel) a segment on "the Sexual Madness Plague," on CNN's *Medline Sunday*. (Yes, alas and alack they copied *Time's* label for X, just like all the rest of the media have been doing.) He says it was a terrible piece, and that he'll be here in about thirty minutes with his tape of it. (Fortunately he doesn't live out near Oschner, but here in New Orleans, albeit in Gentilly.) I was surprised to hear that he was in town. But he says that since he doesn't know how long he's going to be stuck on the job in Lafayette, he's taking off weekends "like any normal professional."

Even if he is bringing bad news, it will be lovely to visit with him. He has such an ordered view of reality, refreshing in the midst of such chaos. And a quiet manner, and a charming smile and gentle laugh. . . .

Later—11:35 P.M.

Michael's just now left. Whew. A good thing, too. There's something about that man. As though there's an electrical current emanating from him. (Oh cliché, cliché, but it's TRUE.) I didn't realize it before, but I'm tremendously attracted to him sexually. Though we started out coolly enough, discussing The Problem in a very businesslike, collegial way, about half an hour ago I suddenly became hyper-conscious of his eyes, and of our being alone together in a hotel room away from home. Could hardly drag my eyes off his, yet at the same time was afraid to look at him. Stupid adolescent stuff. It's been years since I've felt so awkward, so illicitly . . . *wanting*.

And so . . . must get hold of myself. (Did he feel it too, I wonder? Or was it only one-sided? Perhaps he sensed my desire, while not feeling any himself. . . .) Think about the tape we played and discussed. Yes. Think about that. Ugly. Oh so ugly. A sign of the battle to come, I fear. The battle won't be merely the disease, but public attitudes toward it. . . . Somehow, mutations of "morally neutral" diseases (which is a stupid term, since it adopts the fundamentalists' frame of reference, but that is what we're talking about here), though causing grief and fear and pain, don't provoke outrage and irrational behavior. But X, alas, isn't "morally neutral." The weird thing about that, though, is that the disease isn't transmitted sexually (as far as we've been able to make out), but is "immoral" because of its symptoms. Which is a bizarre, chiasmatic switch.

The *Medline* segment focused mostly on the Olivier case. It seems that most of Olivier's in-laws were down on her even before she manifested

symptoms of X, suggesting they feel absolutely certain in their moral interpretation and orientation. (They don't doubt the disease is transmitted sexually—the worry being, they said on camera, that the husband will come down with it, too, though another of them said in (unwitting) contradiction that that was impossible, that a decent person would not descend into such bestial madness.) Olivier is, to begin with, an atheist. (And Broussard just doesn't *have* atheists.) Secondly, she's from New Orleans, which makes her an outsider. (Which probably wasn't enough to turn them against her, but no doubt exacerbated their antagonism once it bloomed.) Third, two years ago she went to Oschner's and terminated an earlier pregnancy when she discovered the fetus had Down's syndrome. ("She's a murderer. I ask you! What kind of mother do you think a person who killed her first baby would make, anyway?") And fourth, at the onset of X she reportedly attempted to seduce her husband's thirteen-year-old nephew. "That girl's not fit to be a mother." And: "She always had her nose in the air. So snippy to the family, couldn't be bothered to talk on the phone when you called, always wanting to pass you to Jamison right off, as though you were interrupting something more important than polite conversation. And of course she was always making sure everyone knew she was a Ph.D. Refused to get married in the church because she said the marriage rite sounded to her like a celebration of a slave-sale." On camera, they asserted that Olivier was a criminal, with no sense of moral responsibility. They wanted custody of the fetus assigned to a guardian (one of them).

Well, that part isn't new—poor Michael was besieged by all this shit when she was admitted a week ago. (Luckily Olivier's case management belongs to the ob-gyn, and not Michael. Which puts the ob-gyn between a rock and a hard place.) I suppose this program shows the way it will go. And here I thought that because they couldn't put pictures of people suffering X on the screen that the visual media at least would lay off, since with no pictures there's no video interest. Hah. I hadn't accounted for photos and home videos of the patients before they were struck, or sinister shots of hospital corridors and the exterior, or gossipy interviews with neighbors, and hellfire and damnation sermons from fundamentalist preachers and priests.

"The End is Coming!" one of the idiots trumpeted for the *Medline* cameras. No doubt the media jocks all think it's a joke. Sexual Madness in Acadiana. Right. But in the meantime there've been several new cases in Missouri, Ohio, and Kentucky.

To hell with the summary of the week. I'm too tired to do more than rant here. Will try to be a little better organized and more conscientious in the future.

* * *

11:40 P.M., Monday, 30 April

It's become painfully clear that we've underestimated the problems X can create (will create; is creating). There had been only two cases of X reported at USL last week. Over the weekend, however, a rash of them suddenly appeared. (How is the damned thing communicated? There's no pattern whatsoever that can be made out, apart from the fact that—so far at least—there have been no cases of prepubescents showing symptoms. Blaine really does have his work cut out for him.) The horror of these USL cases, though, lies in the social behaviors being manifested. Horrible cases of rape, as out of one's worst nightmare. And then two equally horrible cases involving fraternities. In one case, a woman was gang-raped by several dozen men: the woman manifesting the usual symptoms of X, and "merely taken advantage of" (as the police report puts it). No charges will be brought, since she clearly "wanted it." (No matter, apparently, the physical injuries she sustained in the process.) I suppose one could say that that case is merely grotesque. The other case involving a fraternity is less so: a scene of aggravated assault and rape involving one man with symptoms of X and a dozen men apparently "normal," their victims three women whom they allegedly forced to get drunk. According to the police, the X-afflicted man "instigated" the situation. Which then got "out of hand."

But in fact this is only the most visible tip of the iceberg of disorder. Because of the continuing outbreaks of violence, four parishes have now imposed curfews, and are pleading with the Governor for law-enforcement assistance. Blaine's given us a fresh batch of statistics. The outbreaks of X have been spreading steadily in all directions from St. Martin Parish. More shootings and deaths from dehydration or cardiac arrest. (And three more deaths over the weekend of hospitalized cases.) There have been new cases reported as far away as Lake Charles to the west and New Orleans to the east.

It's been settled that I'm to return tomorrow to Washington to discuss the situation with DHHS. Without any idea of what the disease is and how it's being communicated, our focus now is going to have to be coping with its consequences. In the meantime, Michael tells me that patients are being farmed out to every facility that can possibly take them. (Which worries him, since it could in fact cause a greater dissemination.) Am so depressed. Julius tells me I need to think of the situation as a campaign, and to plan my strategy and deploy my public relations tactics accordingly. But this is out of my league, I said. I'm not a communications specialist. What they need is an ad agency to manage this side of the mess. I'm just a physician, with a specialty in viral diseases.

Michael says that people in Lafayette show signs of being nervous, suspicious, and generally frightened. And to think everyone thought it

a sly joke when they first heard of X. Well, now we know it's more than merely an ugly dirty joke. Or rather, that if it's a joke, it could be on just about anyone, which means, of course, that even if there are people somewhere still finding the "joke" funny, those who have started to worry about falling victim to it no longer do.

Oh what fun it will be, sketching out the situation for Whitney when I see her tomorrow. Right. If I make my case effectively, this mess is going to throw her budget all to hell. Let's hope she doesn't blame the messenger for the news.

Already Michael sounded terribly tired when I talked on the phone with him a little while ago—and that's after having had the weekend off. But I know the stress of being around all that must be terrific. He said almost the entire crew of nursing assistants assigned to the X cases marched (en masse) today to the director of the hospital and demanded that they be reassigned. They said that no human being should be forced to take care of such depraved people. They particularly objected to having to deal with the constant flow of sexual secretions. Michael thinks they're demoralized with the implications, and terrified they might catch whatever it is, even though they've been taking the precautions we advised.

Speaking of precautions, now that X is showing up in New Orleans, we've had to give up eating out here, too. The only wonderful thing about New Orleans—its restaurants—is now off-limits. It really is, as Julius keeps saying, like being at war.

11:45 P.M., Friday, 4 May—Lafayette

Have been too tired to make any entries. Have been working—via fax, with one of Whitney's aides—on drafting the set of guidelines she agreed we need to be distributing nationally to the health-care community at large. (And a separate set for law enforcement, which she says she'll get the Attorney General to take on.)

With every day comes new problems. Today's? All the states sharing borders with Louisiana have set up roadblocks to keep people from leaving the state. And they're apparently telling the FAA that if flights from Louisiana aren't interdicted at their airports, they'll blockade the airports, too, to keep arrivals in. If that isn't hysteria, I don't know what is. (The only good thing one can say about it is that it's prompted Atlanta to assign ten more investigators to Blaine's team.)

In the meantime, the lab work continues, but it's a necessarily slow process. If the social reaction were only as slow a process. . . . Yet the public's swing between denial and terror gets more and more violent. That's what really stymies me (and it's something I have *got* to find a way to deal with): that in one breath they can claim that X is an immoral madness that is the fault of whoever manifests its symptoms, and in the

next breath express fear that they might get it—and say that if they *do* get it, it will be because of other people's filth and sinfulness. How can they have it both ways? Cognitive dissonance, I suppose one must call it. A powerfully emotional conceptualization it's difficult to contend with.

Max wouldn't sleep with me the night I spent at home. (Tuesday, was it? I've lost track of the days.) In fact he was concerned that I might be carrying the disease "into our home," unwittingly. He asked me not to kiss Bettina! (And wouldn't touch me himself.) The look on Bettina's face—my own darling girl fearful of her mother! Talk about hurt. And Max thinks my being away is damaging her? What does he think about branding me untouchably dangerous? She's only four-and-a-half years old! How can she possibly understand?

All of which has made me realize what we are up against. Max, after all, is an educated person. I made certain that he understood that we have absolutely no evidence of person-to-person communicability. (None of the out-of-state singletons have so far infected their families or neighbors—though of course it's still early yet.) Not only do we face the problem of the disease's having socially unacceptable symptoms. But we also have to come to terms with the serious consequences likely to result should the disease's transmission remain a mystery.

When I saw Michael this morning—for the first time in nearly a week—I was shocked at his gauntness. He looks as though he's dropped ten pounds. I thought that having been relieved of the responsibility for managing the X cases and taking up instead support and therapy for the relations and friends of the patients (and for staff assigned to X cases) would have lifted his burden. Still, he took the time to take me around to the other hospitals, where we gave pep talks to their administrative and nursing staffs. Michael's discussion of the stress on staff assigned to X cases was excellent, and—in some quarters at least—gratefully received. However. The last place we went to, Our Lady of Lourdes, was something else. Near USL. And like many religiously based private hospitals, understaffed and poorly equipped. The chief administrator protested that they had only taken X patients because the public health officer had said there was no other place for them (and they can always use federal money). But the staff could not cope. (Which is what we were hearing everywhere we went.) Worse, some of them had come down with the disease since the new patients had arrived. And so morale had plummeted, because it was assumed by *everybody* there that the X-afflicted staff had contracted it from the patients. Consequently, the administration had decided to refuse any new cases, and wanted those still alive removed.

Of course I delivered the standard lecture—about the organic nature of X, the need to hold on until we isolate the agent causing it, the

community-based nature of epidemic, and how at such a time everyone must do what she or he can to cope. . . . If I weren't an atheist, I might have said Listen, I thought you people were Christians. . . . But of course since I'm not I didn't. The time for diplomacy may soon be past, but . . . At any rate, I made an appointment to talk to the chief administrator and some of her board's members, tomorrow, in her office.

As for epidemiology: still no prepubescent children with X. Still more whites than blacks. Adolescents seem to react more violently than full-grown adults. (Their testosterone levels are higher.) And as might be expected, older people and those with cardiac problems or diabetes are standing the stress least.

Blaine says that he's established a connection that he's verified, between the first out-of-state singletons: they all traveled, by car, on Interstate 10 between Baton Rouge and Lake Charles. Which is a start, as he says, if not an answer. . . . So far, none of their contacts have shown symptoms. (Which means it would be incorrect to characterize them as index cases.) A relief, in a way. It might mean that the disease is caused by a highly localized, environmental agent. . . .

9:30 P.M., Monday, May 7—Lafayette

After having spent a grueling day doing the talk- and call-in show rounds on both local cable and radio, when I called the office, to check in—tired as a dog, and low, lowdown because of the hysterical and bigoted assumptions behind almost every question asked—I got, finally, some news that *must* be the edge of a big, big breakthrough. Blaine has established a first-order connection! Painstaking investigation has revealed that all but one of the initial out-of-state singletons stopped at the Henderson exit on Interstate 10, to have their batteries switched. The records are there, verifying the connection. But there's more. It seems that one entire household in Broussard that got hit, early in the outbreak, ran a small business making boudin which was sold at the convenience store that does battery-switching at the Henderson exit. On discovering that connection, Blaine followed up by checking out the other places selling the boudin. One place is a convenience store in the same strip mall as the bakery where Celia Willis went that first day she manifested symptoms. (The Pepsico driver says that she mentioned preferring that boudin to all others, and said she often bought it at that store.) The boudin was sold at one other store, located on a road running between Cade and St. Martinville. Blaine is sure that the boudin must be the key. Every scrap of perishable food in the Oubre household (the Oubres being the boudin-makers) was saved, and is in a freezer somewhere. Julius is going to have the lab team on it first thing in the morning.

I was so elated I felt like really celebrating. I fantasized Michael and I eating at one of the fine Cajun restaurants in the area. (I remember hearing about Chez Hébert, a place in New Iberia, when I was at Tulane—and Michael says it's still there. Maybe, if this thing gets wrapped up soon. . . .) Anyway, Michael and I settled for a long, leisurely walk. The streets are so . . . silent. As if everyone's left town. And of course some people have, in terror that they might get X. (Well, there's nothing I can say to reassure them, is there.) Except for grocery, drug, and liquor stores, local business is in a state of paralysis. I've never seen anything like this before. Sure, there've been more than a hundred fatalities in this first month. And people are being turned away from medical facilities, because capacity has been overrun. And granted it's an extremely depressing form of illness, even more frightening than super-virulent strains of TB, because the cause is unknown, communicability a mystery, and death at this point inevitable (though there are still some patients from the earliest days hanging on). But I think it's the way the disease gives the lie to some of our most cherished illusions that is what most powerfully terrorizes people.

I'm to go to Texas tomorrow, to talk with public health officials there, and to pay a courtesy call (since I'll be in the neighborhood, so to speak), on the researcher at Rice who's working on the tissue, cerebrospinal fluid and blood samples Julius sent him. Texas doesn't have as many cases as Louisiana, and their health-care infrastructure is better, fortunately (though unfortunately is not being very cooperative with CDC, because of some past bad feeling). I doubt the public's attitude will be an improvement on what we have here, though. Keeping my fingers crossed Blaine's struck gold, and hoping that the math people in Atlanta come up with something new, now that they've apparently got a large enough sample to do a Grand Tour of the data.

On the personal front, Bettina wouldn't talk on the phone with me tonight. For which I blame Max.

6:40 A.M., 8 May—in flight, between Lafayette, LA. and Austin, TX.

How very strange, traveling in this "government limousine" style. Because Texas has interdicted flights directly from Louisiana, I can't get a commercial flight to Austin. Therefore, DHHS having pulled some strings, a small military jet has been laid on. (Max will be green with jealousy when I tell him.) It's actually going to fly me to Austin, and then from Austin to San Antonio, and from there to Houston, and then back to Lafayette. All very luxurious, and quiet. A nice table on which to work (after *breakfast*). (Which I think the protocol allows me to accept.) And it's also something of an irony. Considering the sloppiness of the service at that hotel on St. Charles we've been put up at in New Orleans

(which looks good on the outside—certainly impressed the hell out of Michael—until I told him about finding a dried piece of spaghetti stuck to the bed linen my first night there), it feels like a promotion in status. But war, Julius keeps saying, turns everything upside down.

I stayed up last night to read the briefing Dee made up for me, and I have to say that the bloom is definitely off the trip (military jet or no). It seems that the Texas state public health department has such bad relations with CDC that we can't even be sure we have been informed of all their reported incidents of X. The CDC only learned of them at all through the good offices of Mario Calixtengo, Julius's connection at Rice. (This was shortly before the team was assembled.) At which Julius called the Texas public health department, and was told that the cases seemed superficially similar, but probably weren't the same disease as that striking southwest Louisiana. Blaine, of course, sent a pair of investigators. (They're in San Antonio, and will be meeting my plane.) I do wish Julius had told me of the problem earlier. I was so damned focused on Lafayette at first that I didn't give a thought to laying groundwork in case X manifested itself in significant proportions elsewhere. (Though in my own defense I have to say that the CDC tends to have good relations with most state health departments. According to Blaine, Illinois and Missouri, in particular, have been wonderfully helpful to his people there.)

12:40 P.M., 8 May—in flight between San Antonio and Houston

Checked in with the office just now. Courtney Comeaux, who first manifested X symptoms on April 10, has had a marked change in condition. According to Julius, she has become *aware* of her surroundings, and is communicating verbally with relatives and staff. This is a first. Does it mean she's recovering? Or is it a second stage of the disease? And is it permanent? The news is *stunning*. It means there's hope—for *recovery*!

Julius warns, of course, that it's premature to conclude she's kicking the disease. He says her pulse is weak, and still too fast. And he says, also, that though she's denying feeling any sexual arousal, she still shows physical signs of it. God, that poor woman. Michael will really have his work cut out for him, if people *recover*. Imagine, facing one's friends, relatives, and colleagues, after behaving in such an extreme way. . . . I didn't say so to Julius, but I bet one of the first things she did was to call the priest (assuming she's Catholic, as most white people in the area tend to be).

Anyway, my spirit's lightened considerably. (And please, please, please don't let Julius discover this is only a passing phase of the disease, or that an antibody has been made to fight the X agent only to have the X agent mutate.)

Trouble is, I know too much immunology to be sanguine. But, for all that, the view from the window of this plane is sun-struck. And Mario Calixtengo has promised me a fine lunch. I can carry the (hopefully) good news to him. (And wish I'd been able to pass it to the people in San Antonio—my fault for not having checked in earlier—where they're quite depressed about their handful of totally unrelated cases dotting the map, all, apparently, having hit people who traveled that same damned section of interstate.)

6:30 P.M., Wednesday, 9 May—Lafayette

Damn, damn, damn, why does everything always get totally screwed up? The news about Courtney Comeaux has somehow already reached the media. The family agreed to keep it a secret, but I suspect it was just too big a piece of news for it not to get told "in confidence" and then (naturally!) passed on, so that before long all of New Iberia and most of St. Martinville had heard. Either that, or a member of the nursing staff leaked it. (Which isn't out of the question, by any means.) I suppose we should have figured we wouldn't be able to control the release. But of course what this means now is that we won't be able to protect the patient's reputation by blanking out her name. (The media already have it.) The worst thing is that the hospital has had to beef up security. The media are just dying to get to Comeaux, who's suddenly become the hottest news item of the week. I can tell my press conference tomorrow will be great fun.

(On the phone to J. this morning I pointed out—again, but more forcefully than ever—that this thing has gotten too big for a mere immunologist to handle. What we need is a pro. Surely Atlanta can supply us with someone? But they have, J. said. By which he meant Lorrie. Only of course they want me, not Lorrie, to be their face. I know damned well that tomorrow's performance will be like trying to cross a minefield blindfolded and handcuffed.)

Michael took me to see Comeaux this morning. We had coffee afterward. He said the hospital administration gave him a hard time about moving Comeaux back to the psychiatric ward, because of worries that the DHHS reclassification could lapse. He told them to call me if they had doubts, because he was certain I'd guarantee the classification would stick, no matter which unit Comeaux's bed was in. The point is that Comeaux couldn't possibly stay with the patients in her ward. (What a horror it must have been, coming to awareness in a place Dante could have envisioned as a circle of hell.) Comeaux, of course, needs psychiatric therapy. And it's not as though her physical condition has returned to normal: her testosterone and adrenal levels are still high, only not as high. Michael says it's obvious she's still sexually aroused, though she's

denying it fiercely. And he says she absolutely has to have a woman therapist, preferably (he says) white; he's certain she'll never talk openly to a male (white or black). I could see it clearly: she's terribly uncomfortable with him. Wouldn't look directly at him. Her hands kept straying under the sheet, until she would suddenly become aware of what she was doing, and cross her arms tightly over her chest, her hands balled into fists. Michael says the staff say she is so irritable she snaps and snarls at them and her family (who are, I gather, extremely confused, embarrassed, and angry). Well, of course no one knows how to talk about such a thing. For all that most advertisements and entertainment are pornographic, this society is extremely buttoned up. As Michael says, we are all trained to externalize and elaborate certain aspects of our sexuality, and repress all others. Which means that whenever an individual (or group) is faced with a crisis involving things sexual, aggression and censorship are the only reactions easily available to most people.

Blaine says that the radius of incidence has widened considerably, such that Lake Charles is now reporting more than a dozen cases. He says this pattern of spread, especially taken with the extreme isolation of the out-of-state cases, argues against contagion from person to person, as well as against an aerobic agent. He thinks it might be something carried by a nonhuman vector—domestic animals, perhaps, or insects. (No pattern of owning domestic animals has emerged so far in the data.)

Though I have this horror to go through tomorrow, I don't feel so depressed now, with Blaine starting to make headway, and the example of Comeaux showing a possibility, at least, for recovery.

11:20 P.M., Friday, 11 May—New Orleans

I suppose it's a good thing Michael drove me back to New Orleans this afternoon. (Though one might argue that it's a little like closing the stable door after the horse has bolted.)

I was to have gone back last night with Lorrie (who, hailing from the uncivilized West, knows how to drive). But . . . well. After the press conference, which was truly harrowing, I a) had a really upsetting phone conversation with Max; and b) received a phone call from the governor, who ranted and raved at me for not having said anything helpful in my press conference. "My state is falling apart, Doctor!" he screamed at me. "And you people certainly aren't helping the situation! Not only are several parishes completely shut down, but tourists have been scared off from New Orleans and all truck transport of our agricultural produce and manufacturing products has been halted." He seemed to hold me personally responsible for the CDC's not already having found a miracle cure for X. (Does the man have any idea what's involved?) I understand that he's upset that X has begun to show up in New Orleans. (Hell, it

must scare the pants off him to have it raging in Baton Rouge. I gather a state legislator has come down with it.) But what the hell does he expect me to do—lie? Diplomatically, I pointed out that DHHS has been splendid, and that he's protected at least where his health-care budget is concerned. But state revenues have dropped, and will soon be plummeting. A terrible crisis, I agreed.

He wasn't satisfied.

The phone call with Max came afterward. Actually, I called Max to get some comfort and support. (Old habits die hard.) Instead, I got the cold, silent treatment. (The MacFarlane special, I almost told him I call it.) And so by the time I hung up, I was crying. And wanting comforting even more than ever. And whom did I think of, who would be sympathetic and understanding?

Well, he was. He was *very* understanding. And sympathetic. And warm . . . and so, well, one thing led to another.

Hell. This is the first time I've had sex with anyone but Max since we signed our commitment contract. But Michael, well, he's just so kind. And wise. And beautiful. Oh, is he beautiful. He could have been a model, he's that perfect physically. (And, I imagine, if he weren't so tired and stressed, he would be even more beautiful.) That warm glowing color of his skin is imprinted on my brain. Even if I forget the exact shape and proportion of his eyes (which shine so beautifully when he's making love), I'll never forget that color. And the mole on his neck. And the feel of my finger in his navel.

Oh. Oh. Oh.

I'm practically speechless.

Anyway, he spent the night in my room at the Acadian Inn. And then took the morning off, to drive me to a remote, deserted place called Fausse Pointe State Park, at the edge of "the Basin" (as the locals call the swamp), right up against "the levee." We drove first to St. Martinville (which I'd already seen), where we grabbed a look at the Evangeline Oak (which someone in the nineteenth century filled with cement), a tree hundreds of years old, presumably the site at which Emmeline Labiche did her romantic thing which inspired Longfellow when he heard about it later. We then took a road through mostly cane fields, until we came to a tiny place too small to be properly called a town (Coteau Holmes, population 98). When the road ended, we turned onto another running parallel to the levee, until we came to the entrance of the state park. (There's something about levees that piques my curiosity, because one can't see over them. And there were **No Trespassing** signs posted on this one every hundred or so yards. Which made it even more intriguing.) St. Martinville was deserted. And we saw no one at all at Lake Fausse Pointe. Which had cabins, that Michael says they rent out. And a boat

launch. And picnic areas. Plus several walks. And lots of water—a bayou and some canals, I think (besides, of course, the lake). Everything very cinematically swampy. The water high and brown, and covered with lily pads and the standard green scum. Flying insects everywhere (few of them identifiable). Everything rotting and humid and green. And lots of elegant white birds. (Egrets?) (And Michael told me that the birds that make the flat, shrill call one hears in New Orleans and Lafayette are bluejays, of all rather ordinary things.)

Michael had brought a blanket, which we spread on the grass. And then we ate our picnic. Champagne (at ten in the morning!) and fruit (frozen, of course, before we'd thawed it) and muffins (which were soggy, though Michael defrosted and heated them in the staff lounge just before we started). It would have been perfect if we hadn't had to battle the flies, which kept going for the fruit, and the mosquitos, which left large ugly red bumps on my ankles and hands, even now maddening me with the desire to scratch.

And then, since no one was around and the sun wasn't as hot as we'd feared (though no doubt the UV wasn't good for us), we made love (again). (Safely, of course.) And then nibbled more at our picnic, and took a walk, and finished our picnic, and cuddled and caressed (knowing it must be the last time), and then left, for New Orleans.

Embarrassing to have to note our (safe) sex in my personal protocol log. But of course no one will ever see it (unless I come down with X). Though it's bad to lie to our mates, we are both going to do just that. We know we would never have behaved this way if it weren't such a stressful, combat situation. (We are on the front-line.) Our needs and emotions are quite different than is normal. Certainly our mates would not understand that. But we must stop. On that we're also agreed. This must be the end. From here on out, it's to be friendship only, and no more sex.

I must be really tired, or I wouldn't be crying. The stress is definitely getting to me.

10:30 P.M., Saturday, 12 May—Lafayette

It may be a Saturday, but I have no choice but to work through the weekend. Vexations, vexations . . . I'm about ready to scream with frustration. (And with wanting Michael, despite our having parted very firmly after dinner, determined not to relapse.) Where do I start? Blaine's here, just down the hall from me. There's been some sort of bizarre cover-up, bad enough in itself, but a fiasco for Blaine's investigation. It seems the incidence in an entire segment of the population has been seriously and deliberately underreported. (Oh, the trouble this is going to cause me, when the news hits. Because I'm going to be on the front line taking the shit. Lord, lord, as Michael would say.) It seems that a little town

called Parks, about halfway between St. Martinville and Breaux Bridge, and with a nearly all-black population (rare in Louisiana, a product, Michael says, of a twenty-year idiosyncratic demographic shift), has been absolutely *decimated* by X. Previously we thought that Breaux Bridge had the highest per capita incidence. Now we know that Parks is showing about the same rate. It seems that the first cases of X in Parks resulted in arrests by parish law enforcement officers, culminating in "suicides" while in detention. The media paid no attention to the sharp rise of deaths in custody (being too distracted, I suppose, by the main ring of the X circus). The people of Parks, however, then refrained from bringing X cases to the hospitals for treatment (or should we rather say, maintenance?). And so the death rate has been very high there. The doctor who serves Parks, sympathetic to relatives' desire to keep their family shame a secret, has been writing, simply, "heart failure" on each certificate. And the coroner, terribly overworked, has been accepting the certificates without question. And so the problem, ignored, remained invisible—until Blaine's people stumbled on it late yesterday afternoon.

Sunday's a great day for a press conference, right? Nobody pays attention to news on the weekend (let's hope). . . . So tomorrow I'll read a statement describing what happened, and then squeeze my eyes tight and hope the shit doesn't hit me in the face.

Of course, it was stupid of us (as Blaine ruefully admits) not to have sent investigators to Parks on general principle, especially after the connection with the boudin at the Henderson exit had been established. (But then we haven't sent anyone to, say, Coteau Holmes, either, which is largely white and Cajun. . . .)

What a terrible, devastating disease. One that in some ways is as painful for the survivors as for the patient. (Unless, of course, it turns out that more patients than just Courtney Comeaux recover awareness.)

And now, the second front on which there were developments today. First, re X: Comeaux's thrown out a rash that's spreading, inexorably, over every inch of her skin. And last night she ran a fever that spiked at 103.5. Her body, as J. says, is putting up a hell of a fight. Second, re X: it seems that several other patients, none of whom have regained awareness, also have rashes, as well as fever at night. J. is tentatively calling this "Phase II." And so now the thing is to try to culture the fluid in the pustules. It's hoped there will be better success with it than with the other tissue samples. So far there's no statistically significant difference between any of the groups getting various combinations of antibiotics and the control group. Third, re X: the autopsy done on a man who died on Monday—one who had a rash, and fever—showed signs of neural degeneration. He had been showing symptoms since April 13.

J. is annoyed because the rash and fever slipped by us. He's here in

Lafayette, too, to raise hell. Our assumption is (and Michael concurs) that the patients are not bathed by people trained to notice things like rashes, and that though the fevers have been recorded on the patients' charts, the physicians managing the cases weren't looking for it, and so didn't notice the pattern, but probably just assumed they were dealing with an unrelated, opportunistic, secondary infection.

But then few people think of X as an infection, Michael says. While the team has of course been wondering all along if the patients would develop fever.

And now, back to Comeaux: it seems she's at war with both the nursing staff and her family. She ordered the latter out of her sight, and screams at anyone who approaches that she wants to be left alone, and not bugged. (And no, she hasn't asked for a priest.) When staff came rushing in to quiet her, she demanded to be released from the hospital. They refused, of course. The family eventually left, the mother in tears, the father telling her she has shamed the family name, and the brother chiding her for not appreciating their concern for her.

But that's not all. It seems that the nursing staff are in an uproar because she masturbates. She denied it hotly, when confronted. And so the nursing staff next asked for authorization to put her in restraints, to stop her. Michael doesn't think it's a good idea. The nursing staff are hysterical. The other patients in her ward are upset. The whole thing is a *mess*.

I'd give anything for this to have been another mutation of viral meningitis.

1:10 A.M., Sunday, 13 May—Lafayette

Have been chatting with Michael, on the phone. It turns out that he couldn't sleep, either, and decided to take the chance of calling me in case I was having trouble, too. He says the weather is driving him nuts. The night air is steaming, he says, following the heavy rain we got this afternoon. He has good reason to know, because the owner of the house providing his accommodations at the parish's (or feds'?) expense says that under no circumstances does she turn on the air conditioning until June 1, that it would be too expensive. So Michael is miserable. The air *clings* to one's skin, like a slithery coat of goop.

We talked in the dark (as I'm now writing in the dark). And while we talked I imagined lying beside Michael, naked . . . but at the same time, I kept flashing on two different images apparently stuck in my brain, like a visual tape loop. I keep seeing the pale, heat-shimmering pavement of the Interstate, like thighs and legs bent at the knees, as it appears when one drives across the Atchafalaya Basin, which stretches most of the distance between Baton Rouge and Henderson. And I see the levee,

bordering the road to the state park, merely a barrier, a little like a pie crust—which, when I look at the map, I see is meant to contain the same swamp the Interstate crosses. These two images haunt me, I don't quite know why. The swamp all slimy green scum (that looks very much like the algae covering the bayou in the state park), a darkness crossed by the highway. (When we cross that swamp in daylight, I can't keep myself from feeling as though the roads ahead of us are legs, outstretched and open, in gynecologist's stirrups. . . .)

I asked Michael how his colleagues could have so fucked up with the X patients. In reply, he talked at length about the inferior funding of health-care in rural areas—where the wages are set far lower than in “more advanced” places—and about the state's chronic underfunding, and how few people from outside the area are recruited into health-care here, and about how when he first went to work for the parish a colleague warned him against all the health-care institutions in the vicinity. “Even if it's an emergency, drive as fast as you can back to New Orleans,” the colleague warned Michael. “They can kill just about any kind of patient here. Because the few RNs there are mostly supervise the non-RNs and attend doctors on rounds, but do no actual patient care. Our Lady of Lourdes is the worst, but Lafayette General isn't much better.” Michael also pointed out that since most of the patients are getting antibiotics of one sort or another, fever might not necessarily strike staff as particularly odd. (And of course patients often get rashes from antibiotics.)

We then discussed how though J. thinks it's probably a virus, not a bacterium, it's necessary to try antibiotics, in case.

It was hard hanging up. Neither of us wanted to. I was just aching for him. It's so hard now to remember Max with any . . . what's the word: sense of fidelity? We only get into shouting matches when we talk on the phone. And he's poisoned Bettina's love and trust in me.

The next week is going to be hell to get through. Not only will the Parks business be a nightmare, but the question of what to do about the quarantine around Louisiana is going to come to a head. Store shelves are just about bare now. People in the northern part of the state are outraged at this, since they have no X. (Yet.) Unless the neighboring governors can be brought to relent, we're going to need federal assistance to get food supplies in.

Have an awful headache. Will take aspirin. And then try again to sleep.

10:40 P.M., Monday, 14 May—Lafayette

Civil disorder in New Orleans. National Guard sent in. I'm to see Whitney tomorrow. The president, it seems, is concerned. I'm running

on adrenaline—doing fifteen-hour days. The world has gone absolutely mad, it seems.

7:20 P.M., Thursday, 17 May—Lafayette

There's a new phase—Phase III?—manifesting in Comeaux and two others: violent seizures resembling grand mal.

All the state colleges and universities have been closed early. (Tulane, having already finished its academic year, had no need to do so. But it's canceling its summer session.) The governor has declared a state of emergency. In the meantime, neighboring governors have taken the federal government to court, to nullify the effect of the president's executive order overriding the governors' quarantine. The whole situation is turning into political mud-wrestling. I've been requested to coordinate our releases to the media with the White House's press office. . . .

I wish I could quit. But I can't. Not with J. counting on me, not with Michael so damned alone in his struggle here. No time for more, too much work pressing.

7:30 P.M., Monday, 21 May—New Orleans

Courtney Comeaux is dead. (Shall we call that phase IV of X?) The people at Rice think X may be caused by a subviral particle. J. is still sticking with the as-yet-unidentified virus. Still nothing cultured.

Max is not speaking to me, because he's had to give up his conference to stay home with Bettina. And my period's late. (Which more than lack of sleep may account for the wretched headaches I've been plagued with lately.) It's said that people are trying to flee the state, any way they can. Many are entering Mississippi on foot, wearing backpacks. The current explanation for X (apart from the evangelical one, which prevails in certain quarters, that the apocalypse is on the way) is that there's something in the air here, some pollutant that's making people crazy. Years of chemical dumping in the swamps, they mutter. (And the media persistently screen library tapes of the many chemical plants lining the Mississippi and polluting the waters since the middle of the last century.) And the plague started, they go on to say, right there at the very edge of the swamp. Obviously it's not contagious, they say, since the out-of-state people who got it never passed it to anyone else.

Blaine has started on the insect population. (Which is mighty big, especially around here.) He's convinced an insect is the vector spreading the damned bug.

Am going to take a lovely smooth tranquilizer Michael gave me last weekend and get some zees. My body's going all to pieces from the stress, and is in desperate need of the downtime.

* * *

6:10 P.M., Thursday, 24 May—New Orleans

Oh god. Oh god. Michael's been struck down by X. He realized it was happening, and, fighting against the grain of the disease, checked himself into the hospital. Lord, lord. I'm going to Lafayette tonight—one of Blaine's people will drive me—even though I know there's nothing I can do, still, I must, I must. Oh god. I feel sick. Oh Michael, Michael, how could this happen to you. The healer, stricken. Oh god. Must stop crying and get a bag together. And poor Janet. Poor poor Janet. To lose such a fine partner.

But no. Michael's a fighter. If anybody can survive this, he can.

2:30 A.M., Friday, 25 May—Lafayette

He just lies there, his body rigid, his breathing fast and labored. His heart racing away, as though it were going to drive him into oblivion. I couldn't stand watching the monitor, blipping so fucking fast. I met Janet. She's moving him to Oschner, of course. She's so scared. And there was nothing good I could tell her. Oh god. Lord, lord. I can't bear this. No, I can't bear this. And everything's so ugly. And it's raining again. And hot, even in this air-conditioned room, hot. Got to get up and take another shower. This filthy mucky place.

Like a sewer, it is.

4:00 A.M., Sunday, 27 May—New Orleans

Have lain awake all night thinking, and have made myself face the likelihood that X will get me, too.

Michael realized what was happening early enough to check himself into the hospital. Well, that means that if X hits me, I might be aware of what is happening for a little while, too. And I've decided. (Having thought all damned night about it.) I've decided that I don't want to go through it. Tomorrow I'm going to filch a syringe. Yes. And if—when—I feel X coming on, I'm going to inject myself with an air bubble. It's impossible to imagine the team finding a cure any time soon, since we haven't yet identified the agent, or any likely antibodies. So. Rather than put Max through all that, rather than have myself become a freak show, rather than go through god knows what before X kills me, I'm going to be prepared to spare us all that.

The whole damned world has gone mad, anyway. Could almost kill myself right now, at this second.

Yes, I am depressed. Must be because I still haven't got my period.

Will get up now and take a shower and go in to the office early. I'm supposed to talk to some aide in Washington at nine our time. It will take me that long to prepare, anyway.

* * *

5:30 P.M., Wednesday, 30 May—New Orleans

Three of Blaine's people are down with X. Unless I have a natural immunity, it can be only a matter of time for me. Have written a note for Max, and another for J., in case I have to do it. (There might not be time, otherwise.) Am popping Michael's tranquilizers like crazy. Because the stress is making me wild. About jumping out of my skin. (Worse than during periods.)

11:15 A.M., Friday, 1 June—New Orleans

This is it. I've got it. X. I've got X. Am so horny. Realized it when I couldn't bring myself to answer the phone, which has been chirping almost nonstop for two hours at least—because I was unwilling to stop masturbating. Explains why my period hasn't come. My hormones obviously a godawful mess. Oh the sexual fantasies, really wild. (More like hallucinations.) Vivid—lifelike—too, too, real, without the abstraction of ordinary fantasies. Obsessed with images of the interstate as it passes through the swamp, insects swarmed and hovering. The whine of insects in my ears, like the mosquitos you get in the night here. (Can't get it out of my mind, all those insects attacking Michael and me, lighting on the fruit, biting our tender, exposed flesh, trying to drive us from paradise.) So sweaty, so genitally slick it's easy to imagine I'm in it, the swamp I mean. The green scum a delight. An irritating delight. My nipples all prickling and stinging and itchy. My thighs streaked with sensation. My hand tired and cramped. Because I keep thinking that if only I can come, that will fix me fine. But then when I come, I'm still all itchy and wanting.

Will stop, while I'm still human. Or rather, while my conscious, willful mind is still at all a part of me. X robbing me of all that. It's so ironic, I can grasp the lesson, even in my debilitated state. Intellectually I've always known myself to be a single organism in which mind is a part of the body and the body a construct of the mind. But all that's now become impossible for me to hold in my mind (oh jesus, I can't even talk without messing up, can I) because now all I can think is that I'm rapidly being reduced to a mindless, bestial *thing*. And that I can't bear to imagine myself as I know I'm becoming. I'm clinging to mind/body dualism. Or rather *it's* clinging to *me*.

Now, to get out the letters for M. and J., and then to do it, just do it—while I'm still me.

NEW ORLEANS May 25 (AP)—A spokesperson for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced today that Dr. Laurel di Sforza, of the CDC, died today, by suicide. Dr. di Sforza served as congressional liaison for three years before being appointed the protocol officer for the team working on the mysterious

disease that is raging out of control in the state of Louisiana. Dr. di Sforza was said by Dr. Julius Schaefer, the team's chief investigator, to have been despondent at the slowness of the team's progress in identifying and fighting the disease. Dr. di Sforza is survived by a daughter, Bettina, and a family partner, Dr. Max MacFarlane, the cardiac specialist of Bethesda, Maryland. She was thirty-eight years old. ●

NEXT ISSUE

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Now, we've published stories set on a terraformed Mars before (and have several excellent ones by other hands still in inventory), but from early stories such as "Exploring Fossil Canyon" and "Green Mars" on through *Red Mars* itself, Mars has always been special territory to Robinson, calling up the best in him, and since Robinson is one of the most accomplished writers in science fiction, a stylist of grace and power as well as a subtle and complex student of the hidden corners of the human heart, that best is impressive indeed... and this story of a boy's coming-of-age as a hunted expatriate in the hidden cities of a future Mars that is both vividly strange and convincingly plausible is sure to be one of the major stories of the year. Don't miss it!

ALSO IN FEBRUARY: multiple Hugo-winner **Mike Resnick**, one of our most popular authors, returns to paint a poignant and bittersweet portrait of "Barnaby in Exile"; Nebula and Hugo-winner **Terry Bisson** spins a warm, funny, and deliciously bizarre tale, in the tradition of the best of R.A. Lafferty, of some intrepid explorers who dare to venture into the wilds of darkest Brooklyn in search of "The Hole in the Hole"; new writer **Kandis Elliot** gives us a delightfully wry look at the "Ladder of the Lake"—and shows us how to catch it, too; popular writer **Allen Steele** returns to give us a very different perspective—from, say, half-an-inch high—on law enforcement, in a fast-paced and furious romp called "Whinin' Boy Blues"; critically acclaimed writer **Phyllis Eisenstein** returns after a long absence (her last appearance here was in 1985) with a hard-edged and unsentimental examination of the dangers and disappointments of dealing with the paranormal, in "No Refunds"; and new writer **Michael H. Payne** returns with one of the weirdest and funniest stories we've ever published, the action-packed and indescribably odd saga of a world-shaking struggle to claim "A Bag of Custard." Plus a Guest Editorial by Nebula and Hugo-winner **Geoffrey A. Landis**, and a array of columns and features. Look for our February issue on sale on your newsstands on January 4, 1994.

COMING SOON: major new stories by **Robert Silverberg**, **Frederik Pohl**, **Maureen F. McHugh**, **Brian W. Aldiss**, **Pat Murphy**, **John Brunner**, **Damon Knight**, **Lisa Goldstein**, **Mike Resnick**, **Pamela Sargent**, **Michael Swanwick**, **Mary Rosenblum**, **Alexander Jablakov**, and many others.

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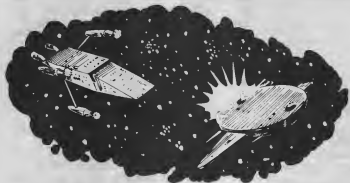
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* * *





EIGHTH ANNUAL READERS' AWARD

Well, the months have flown by, another year has gone, and *that* means that once again it's time for our Readers' Award poll, now in its eighth year.

Most of you know the drill by now. For those of you who are new to this, we should explain a few things.

We consider this to be our yearly chance to hear from *you*, the readers of the magazine. That's the whole point behind this particular award. What were *your* favorite stories from *Asimov's Science Fiction* last year? This is your chance to let us know what novella, novellette, short story, poem, cover artist, and interior artist you liked best in 1993. Just take a moment

to look over the Index of the stories published in last year's issues of *Asimov's* (pp. 168-171) to refresh your memory, and then list below, in the order of your preference, your three favorites in each category. (In the case of the two art awards, please list the *artists* themselves in order of preference, rather than the individual covers or interior illustrations—with the poetry award, however, please remember that you are voting for an individual *poem*, rather than for the collective work of a particular poet that may have appeared in the magazine throughout the year.)

Some further cautions: Only material from 1993-dated issues of *Asimov's* is eligible. Each reader

gets *one* vote, and *only* one vote. If you use a photocopy of the ballot please be sure to include your name and address: your ballot won't be counted otherwise.

Works must also be categorized on the ballot as they appear in the Index. No matter what category *you* think a particular story ought to appear in, we consider the Index to be the ultimate authority in this regard, so be sure to check your ballots against the Index if there is any question about which category is the appropriate one for any particular story. In the past, voters have been careless about this, and have listed stories under the wrong categories, and, as a result, ended up wasting their votes. All ballots must be postmarked no later than February 1, 1994, and should be addressed to: Readers' Award, *Asimov's Science Fiction*, Dell Magazines, 1540 Broadway, New York, NY, 10036.

Remember, *you*—the readers—will be the only judges for this award. No juries, no panels of experts. *You* are in charge here, and what *you* say goes. In the past, voter response has been good, and some categories have been hotly contended, so every vote counts. Don't let it be *your* vote for your favorite stories that goes uncounted! Some years, that one vote might have made all the difference. So don't put it off—vote today!

The winners will be announced in an upcoming issue.

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1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

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1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

With this year's cons over, let's look at the winter to come. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, a sample of SF folk-songs, and information about clubs and fanzines, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. The hot line is (703) 2SF-DAYS (273-3297). If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months ahead. Look for me at cons as Filthy Pierre, with a music keyboard.

JANUARY 1994

14-16—Dawson's Con. For info, write: Box 15273, Fremont CA 94539. Or phone: (415) 324-9124 (10 A.M. to 10 P.M., not collect). Con will be held in: San Francisco Bay area (if city omitted, same as in address). Guests will include: Poul Anderson, spacey computer freak Cliff Stoll.

7-9—TropiCon, Box 70143, Ft. Lauderdale FL 33307. (305) 385-4111. Airport Hilton, Palm Beach FL.

14-16—RuneQuestCon, % 313 E. 85th 2C, New York NY 10028. (212) 472-7752. Columbia MD. Gaming.

21-23—Arlisla, 1 Kendall Sq. #322, Cambridge MA 02139. Park Plaza Hotel, Boston, MA. Robinsons.

21-23—ConFusion, Box 8284, Ann Arbor MI 48107. (313) 429-3475. Holiday Inn, Romulus MI. Vinge.

FEBRUARY 1994

18-20—Boskone, Box 809, Framingham MA 01701. (617) 625-2311. Sheraton Tara. Shetterly, Bull.

18-21—CostumeCon, 223 Addison, San Francisco CA 94131. SF, fantasy and historical costuming.

19-20—Conv-Iction, Box 742, Pointe-Claire, PQ H9R 4S8 Canada. (514) 432-8356. French.

25-27—VisionCon, Box 1415, Springfield MD 65801. Fantasy gaming meet with Star Trek tilt.

25-27—Egyptian Campaign, % SGS, SIUOSD, 3d Ft. Stud. Ctr., Carbondale IL 62901. (618) 529-4630.

MARCH 1994

3-6—World Horror Con, Box 60008, Phoenix AZ 85082. (602) 841-5153. At the Fountain Suites Hotel.

4-6—AstonomiCon, Box 1701, Rochester NY 14603. (716) 342-4697. Radisson. Jack Chalker, Freas.

11-13—LunaCon, Box 3566 Church St. Stn., New York NY 10008. Hilton, Rye Brook NY. V. McIntyre.

11-13—InterCon, Box 196, Merrifield VA 22116. (703) 912-9877. Live-action role-playing gaming.

SEPTEMBER 1994

1-5—ConAdian, Box 2430, Winnipeg MB R3C 4A7. (204) 942-3427. WorldCon. \$85/CS\$95 to 9/30/93.

AUGUST 1995

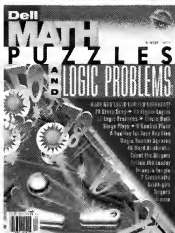
24-28—Intersection, Box 15430, Washington DC 20003. Glasgow UK. WorldCon. US\$85 to 9/30/93.


AUGUST 1996

29-Sep. 2—LA Con III, % SCIFI, Box 8442, Van Nuys CA 91409. WorldCon. Bid unopposed, at press.

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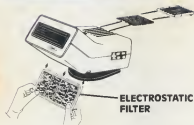
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